



David M. Valadez
Senshin Center
Dojocho

Conscious Relaxation

by David M. Valadez

Learning how to use the body wisely is a large part of training. We are indeed supposed to gain a “body wisdom” through the various ins and outs of daily training. A large part of that wisdom rests in learning how to move in a biomechanically sound manner. That soundness itself rests largely in being able to operate under a stress-free condition. Relaxation, the absence of tension, is a huge part of the body wisdom we are to gain through Aikido practice.

We train so that this relaxation comes to be second nature – comes to be our natural state. However, before that, and even at moments within that second nature, we should be able to also apply various forms of conscious relaxation. One of the first times that the need to perform conscious relaxation comes to us is as uke – particularly in addressing the various locks that have several aspects to their tactical architecture. Locks like this are, for example, Nikyo, Sankyo, Gokyo, and Rokkyo. Ikkyo would not be considered such a lock since in its basic form the hold that addresses kuzushi is the same hold that executes the pin.

Because of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or of being in the right place but in the wrong way, etc., we can as uke react to various aspects of these locks by experiencing and/or introducing a great amount of tension into the arm being manipulated by nage. This tension, if left to its own design, will often go on to exponentially increase our inability to relax as the lock progresses in its architecture. It will thereby inhibit our capacity to experience the lock fully and/or with the least amount of pain and/or chance for injury. Under such conditions, we are even prone to miss the nuances of nage’s technique. These nuances often include moments for us as uke to regain our emotional composure, moments that we of course will not be able to take advantage of due to our preoccupation with fear, pain, and self that is being fueled by the increasing amount of tension we are facing.

At such times, it is good practice to run through a quick routine of conscious relaxation. With skill, such a routine can often bring relaxation to tense areas of the body almost instantaneously. Ultimately we must find our own way of regaining proper form and thereby safety when such tension arises, but conscious relaxation will usually begin with finding one’s breath – which is often being held during moments of stress. From there, we will want to address those muscle groups that either hinder and/or help the inhaling/exhaling process. Of particular interest, we want to begin by consciously relaxing all of the major muscle groups that make up the upper torso (which is where our breath is usually “trapped” under such circumstances). Be sure to relax your chest, your back, your shoulders, and most importantly the root of your tongue and/or neck-throat area. Such relaxation will allow your breath to flow freely again, and thereby you will immediately notice a significant decrease in the amount of pain you are experiencing and/or in the chance for injury you are facing. With your breath found again, and with tension again absent

from your body, address the remainder of your ukemi with proper technique. A great way of cultivating the skill of conscious relaxation is to practice yogic postures. One should run through the technique of conscious relaxation while in each posture. The pose “Corpse Pose,” or “Savasana,” can be central to developing the skill of conscious relaxation. Often mistaken by the beginning practitioner as an easy posture to practice, Savasana is actually considered the most difficult pose to practice.

Savasana’s seemingly simplicity comes from a superficial glance that holds the posture to be void of technique, skill, and application. In Savasana, we posture the mind and body to imitate a corpse. For many, being a corpse merely means to be asleep. This is a misunderstanding of Savasana. Sleeping prevents us from cultivating the depth and subtlety of the pose. This is because habitual patterns of thought and action survive our sleep states of consciousness. Savasana exists somewhere off the spectrum of effort and sleep. Key to a being a corpse is our detachment from the material distractions that are common to mind and body. In Savasana, we can begin this detachment by simply allowing the breath to move through its inherent inhaling and exhaling. We apply no special breathing technique while in Savasana. As the breath finds its way through the open channels of the tense-free but awake body, the mind also finds its own kind of freedom in the awareness that is gained by our moving out of the way of the pose. This moving out of the way is what is common between Savasana and the practice of conscious relaxation within ukemi. As nage clearly has moments when “moving out of the way” is central to the task at hand, uke too has equally central moments of “moving out of the way,” only these moments often involve a mental or emotional “moving out of the way.” Conscious relaxation is us moving out of the way, is us regaining enough composure to again conjoin with the practice in the present moment.

A final note: Under normal circumstances, one should not use their limbs to get up from the mat when pinned or thrown. One’s actions, which must include getting up from the mat, should always be dominated by one’s center as origin. This becomes doubly important when one is facing the need to apply conscious relaxation to their ukemi. Realize that the need for conscious relaxation presupposes that the limb in question has already experienced a great deal of stress. Therefore, under such circumstances it is particularly important that you do not out of habit seek to use that limb to support your body weight in getting up from the mat so soon after said stress has been halted following the tap out. Use your legs to get up!