

A Good Class

by: Evelina Datta

The gi is sticking to my body with the summer heat ... I have not slept for the last forty hours preparing and then carrying out an important presentation for my work. I have dragged myself to class as if in a daze. Now, having done about thirty rolls for warm-ups, I feel like I am tripping.

Despite being so tired I really want to make this class be more than just surviving it. I want to make this a good class. I am determined to practice the techniques well and learn as much as I can from tonight's lesson. That is what I tell myself for motivation as we are asked to spread out on the mat and practice *ippon seoi-nage*.

I play my role as uke well, but when it comes time to switch my motivation drops about halfway down. Although I am trying very hard to make the best of tonight's class, I have to admit that *ippon seoi-nage* is hardly my favorite defense technique. Being a 120-pound girl, it's not like I would actually ever defend myself with a shoulder throw in real life. Now that I have to pick up my 200-pound "attacker" and throw him on the floor, I feel more tired than ever. The mental image of my bed seems very appealing. Or even better, I could have gone for drinks and then to bed. That coworker who asked me out was kind of cute, but then, I don't know, we work together after all so maybe —

Bam! I bite into my tongue as I hit the floor. There is sharp pain and then the taste of blood in my mouth. This definitely wakes me up.

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wakes me up.”

My instructor comes running. “What happened here? Are you two alright?”

“Yeah, we are fine. I lost my balance as I was trying to throw him and we both fell down.” I am trying to avoid swallowing the blood.

“If you had been paying attention to your technique, this wouldn’t have happened,” our sensei says.

Like I didn’t know that already.

I excuse myself to go to the bathroom to rinse my mouth out.

When I come back, our instructor is in the middle of demonstrating a defense from another attack. This one is from an overhead strike with a club. You block it with a *juji* block, then redirect the attacker’s arm towards the side in a semi-circle, catch his wrist, turn around, careful to let their wrist slip a little not to injure them (although of course you wouldn’t want to that on the street), and then you toss them forward in a circular throw.

We spread around the mat to practice. I quite like this technique. It is actually simpler than it seems at first. Maybe this could be my one thing that I can learn well from tonight’s lesson. I decide to put my whole attention and enthusiasm into practicing it, foregoing any thoughts of sleep or cute guys. Block, redirect, catch, let the uke’s wrist slip a little, turn around, throw. Watch your balance. Concentrate on your technique. Block, redirect, catch ... My motions are becoming more fluid and automatic. Block, redirect, catch ... I feel more and more at ease with this technique. Block, redirect, catch ...

Crack! “Ouch! That hurts!”

I was overly dedicated to making the technique work. I totally forgot that in class, as opposed to on the street, I should let the uke’s wrist slip.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! Are you ok?!”

“Ouch. Yeah, I think so. I don’t think you quite got it sprained...”

I feel horrible:

My instructor runs over again. He checks my partner’s wrist, making sure it’s nothing serious. Then he turns around to face me frowning.

“If you had been paying attention to your uke, this wouldn’t have happened.” *Like I didn’t know that already.* “You are a green belt, and he’s a yellow belt. You are the higher rank; you need to be more careful.”

I give out a heavy sigh. I should not have even come to class when I was so tired in the first place. I mean, who am I kidding — am I actually even able to learn anything like this? Worse, I also came very close to injuring both myself and the people I work with.

I still do not want to give up. After all, I have come to class to learn. If I could just watch my technique and my uke at the same time... I try to concentrate on this thought as our sensei calls us all together for another defense demonstration.

This one is from a knife attack with thrust to the stomach. After stepping out of the way, catching, redirecting and turning around, you aim for the attacker to end up with the knife stuck in their own stomach.

“I wonder if rubber knives can hurt,” whispers the white belt next to me.

“It can be kind of unpleasant to get a jab in your stomach,” I say, “but don’t worry. If you want to practice together, I’ll make sure to go gently.”

And I really do. I am being so careful this time, so graceful. I am putting all my effort into carrying out the defense while still being mindful of my uke. It’s a bit tricky paying attention to all these hand movements and steps, and the direction of the knife, and the direction of the ki, and the stomach of my uke . . . but I think I am actually doing a pretty good job. As I said, as long as I am careful and graceful —

“Hey, watch out!”

Carried away in my little dance, I have bumped us into the group next to us. I try to apologize and bring us back to our practice.

Passing by, my instructor remarks, “If you had been paying attention to the people practicing around you . . .”

“This wouldn’t have happened,” I finish the sentence with him. See, I knew this already.

He stops and looks at me. He does not say anything more.

Finally he calls out to the whole class, “Let’s line up.”

We put the mats away, and I go downstairs to the women’s locker room to change.

Two younger girls who joined the dojo a couple of months ago are changing as well and chattering excitedly. “And wasn’t it so cool to practice that throw?” “Yeah, but I actually liked the second one more, you know, the one with the jiji block, or whatever they call it. It just makes you feel so . . . in control.” “Totally. And learning the knife stab defense was awesome too.”

Some people just have too much energy.

“And the most awesome thing I learned tonight was to pay attention,” I snap.

Then suddenly I realize it’s true:

Techniques are not the only thing we learn in class.

I know that some time will pass between the initial moment of realization and making what I have learned tonight a constant part of my practice. For many classes to come, my mind will still wander off. I will have to insist on bringing it back to the here and now — in all of its aspects. I will have to make myself time and again be alert to my technique, my uke, my surroundings. Yet now I know from living through it how important awareness is. This is knowledge that I came to through my own experience. It is internal, as opposed to just hearing it from my instructor over and over again. Instead of saying, “Like I don’t know this already”, I now finally *do* know it. This is why what I’ve learned tonight has a good chance of staying in my mind. I guess it was a good class after all.

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