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Learning to Break Balance in Aikido.....

..... Using the Gohon Kuzushi

The Gohon Kuzushi was and is used as an effective method of training Aikidoka to break an opponent's balance. It is based on five movements from the Japanese for five – Go and Hon for exercise. The movements provide a basic introduction to balance breaking within a free play context. Although the sequence was a set form they are practiced as if in a free play situation, that is on the move, from a positive attack and reacting to different situations. It is an “in the moment exercise”, once balance is broken then you have achieved the objective of the exercise.

### **Gohon – the history**

The original Gohon brought over from Japan in the late 1960s was predominantly right sided and as free play, especially Tanto randori. Developed within the Sports Aikido system it has become usual for many Aikidoka to fight in left stance. To this end the GB team at the time, developed the Gohon into an exercise system containing a total of twelve techniques, however in true British style we retained the original name. This was done in part to hide the fact from other international players that the Gohon had been improved and was the corner stone of the GB teams practice.

The ability to exploit your opponent's weaknesses, expose flaws in their posture and effectively break balance is at the core of being able to throw. The Gohon provides a system for exploring and probing for these weaknesses alongside the development of effective technique. Where Kata provides for a range of principles promoting overall technical ability the Gohon is a specialist activity focussed on a singular objective.

The Gohon is still relevant for practice today and is still used to introduce Kyu grades to the concept and practices of balance breaking. Sadly, in many clubs it is not taught in a meaningful way.

Initially practising the Gohon should be done with very light or no resistance in order to perfect the initial catch and movement. As practice progresses the opponent should increase the resistance and make it harder for the thrower to break their balance.

### **Gohon – the techniques**

The structure of the original Gohon was five techniques from a basic right posture including:

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- **Oshi Taoshi**
- **Hiki Taoshi**
- **Waki Gatame**
- **Shiho Nage**
- **Sumi Otoshi**

The advanced version uses the same five techniques but has adapted them for a left posture defence and then added Shomen Ate and Gyaku Ate to the sequence. The fundamental purpose is to use the movements as an entry to technique and is not a

complete throw in its own right. The idea is to ensure balance breaking and move into a combination or a second break balance application. If Shomen Ate is used for an initial balance break it is not always necessary to complete the move using that particular technique. All these techniques can be found in the Sports Aikido “Randori-no-Kata” (highlighted in MAI September and October 2015) in their basic form.

### **The Gohon - step by step.**

To make identification and differentiation easier I have provided black and white photographs of the original Gohon and colour photographs for the additional techniques.

#### **1. Shomen Ate (front head strike)**

This technique is basically an open handed upper cut to the opponent’s jaw. The arm travels upwards following the opponent’s body until it makes contact with the chin. It is not a punch but a controlled contact using the hips as the main driving force. (Fig 1).



**Fig 1 Shomen Ate an effective movement for breaking balance**

Once the opponent’s balance is broken you are free to exploit your opponent’s backward motion in a number of ways. The focus must be on the ability to break balance whilst maintaining your own stable posture. To use the Gohon and maximise its efficiency you need to have a range of combination techniques at your disposal to add to the breaking balance movement. However the Gohon focuses only on the initial balance break, once achieved, job done!

#### **2. Gyaku Ate (reverse strike)**

Once attacked avoid left and strike at opponent’s head with the reverse hand, cutting upward and across the jaw line. In most cases each element of the Gohon is repeated several times at speed in an “Uchi Komi” style.





**Fig 2 Gyaku Ate – using the opposite arm to break the opponent's balance**

For the next ten techniques start in alternate right and left posture. The posture determines which side to avoid, so when in right posture move to the right and when in left move left. The main difference in the techniques will be the initial catch and the direction of balance breaking.

Within Sport Aikido we divide the balance break directions into two main possibilities (although there are many more) these being down the Primary and Secondary lines of weakness.

### **3. Oshi Taoshi (Elbow Push Down or Ikkyo - first form)**

In both variations avoidance is followed by a slightly differing catch. **(Fig 3)** shows the original pushing back toward the head, **(Fig 4)** illustrates a turn to push forward. A strong grip is required to hold and manipulate the opponent's arm and break balance along their weak line.



**Fig 3 Standard grip Oshi Taoshi Illustrating the Secondary line of weakness in opponent's posture both to the front and rear**





**Fig 4 Reverse grip Oshi Taoshi Illustrating the Primary line of weakness both forward and backward across the opponent's body.**

#### **4. Hiki Taoshi**

The initial version crosses the opponent's centre line and follows their Primary weak line (**Fig 5**), while the amended version keeps to the left and draws down their Secondary weak line over the front or leading leg. Both variants use the same hand grip.



**Fig 5 Hiki Taoshi (elbow throw) taking down the primary weak line**

## 5. Waki Gatame (straight armlock or elbow strangle)

Again the catch is the same for both versions, the difference is in the direction of application. Within **(Fig 6)** the direction is forward and to the right, in **(Fig 7)** it is backward with additional rotation.



**Fig 6 Waki Gatame – attacking the elbow in a forward direction.**



**Fig 7 Waki Gatame – with rotating application.**

## 6. Shiho Nage (four direction throw)

Here the first movement extends the opponent's arm away from the body to affect a balance breaking action. **(Fig 8)** whilst the alternative left sided version drives the arm towards the opponent's body in a turning or tenkan adaptation. **(Fig 9)**



**Fig 8 Shiho Nage drawing away from the body**



**Fig 9 Shiho Nage driving into the body**

## **7. Sumi Otoshi (corner drop)**

Due to the nature of this technique both versions break balance down the left hand side of the opponent with an identical catch. The difference is in the direction of balance breaking; the first is straight back (**Fig 10**) – to the back left hand corner of the opponent. The second is using a circling action around the opponent trying for the back right hand corner. (**Fig 11**)





**Fig 10 Sumi Otoshi straight back drive**



**Fig 11 Sumi Otoshi driving out and around the opponent's body**

The Gohon Kuzushi, if practised in a free play style develops the ability of Aikidoka to effectively break balance in Randori. It provides a system for repetitive, dynamic practice in developing core strength and the ability to overcome an opponent and gain entry for a variety of techniques.

**Photographs by: Chris White Photography**

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