

How to be a Good Assistant – a Checklist

By Christine Dyer, AAA Teaching Committee member and assistant since 1990 to James Nakayama Shihandai with input from Jeremy Neff, whose assistance I appreciate.

Being an instructor's assistant may include several challenging roles:

1. Sensei's right-hand person
2. Demonstration uke for Sensei
3. Helping students in Sensei's class (but only when asked)

1. Sensei's right-hand person

List of possible duties:

Before seminars where Sensei is teaching

- Check on travel arrangements for Sensei's party. Know what's going to happen (e.g. itineraries, who is meeting you at the airport, where you are staying) and help to coordinate if necessary.
- Make host aware of preferences, e.g. Sensei is happy to stay at the Motel 6 and only eats burritos.
- If your dojo is hosting, assist Sensei with arrangements, or take the lead if Sensei isn't an administrative type. Make a checklist after the first time and it will be easier in the future.

At seminars

Your job is to make Sensei comfortable and do whatever is reasonable to help the seminar go well:

- Dress appropriately – if Sensei dresses formally, don't look as though you slept under a hedge.
- Carry Sensei's bag.
- Make sure weapons are available for Sensei and yourself – two sets may be needed for kumitachi, etc.
- Do "shomen ni rei" unless someone else has this covered – usually the job of the host, the host's senior student, or the instructor's senior student. Ask who is doing it, if in doubt. Whoever does this at the beginning of class should also do it at the end.
- Bring Sensei drinks at breaks.
- Make sure Sensei's hakama gets folded.
- Make sure Sensei has a ride to wherever people are going.
- Extricate Sensei from people who won't stop talking. A discrete distress signal is useful.
- Remember the names of people you meet. Sensei's memory may need some help!
- Accompany Sensei unobtrusively everywhere except the restroom, unless you are dismissed!

In the dojo

- Make sure everything is set up for class.
- Initiate mat sweeping and dojo cleanups.
- Assist students who need tape, nail clippers, etc.
- If anyone is injured, take care of them without disturbing the class.
- Welcome visitors, and decide whether to introduce them to Sensei. This often goes wrong: Nakayama Sensei says, "Hello, I'm James Nakayama!" The visitor says, "Hi, Jim!" If this happens, say, "Nakayama Sensei, this is Joe Uncouth." If Mr. Uncouth still doesn't get it, whether you correct him directly depends on your instructor's preference for formality vs. awkward moments.
- Offer to fold Sensei's hakama.

2. Demonstration uke for Sensei

Your job is to make the class easy for Sensei to teach. You basically need psychic powers to read Sensei's mind:

- When called, say "Hai!" Bow and come quickly. No extra bows unless Sensei initiates them.
- Tune in with Sensei's verbal and nonverbal signals to figure out what is required.
- Maintain your focus during long explanations or speeches.
- Do NOT test Sensei's technique during the demo.
- Be pliable but not limp, and go where Sensei puts you.
- Be prepared for Sensei to switch between teaching mode and real-time demo mode.
- Do not do anything to draw focus away from Sensei, e.g. speak, make other kinds of noises, pull faces, or do fancy "look at me" ukemi.
- If not instructed otherwise, your default mode should be to do ukemi that the students can also do (i.e. don't do breakfalls if it's a class for beginners).
- If Sensei fires you as uke, it may be because you are making the demonstration difficult, because you cannot do the required ukemi, or because Sensei realized that you are the wrong person to demonstrate with (e.g. the point being made is about someone much shorter or taller). If you think you messed up and wonder what went wrong, most instructors won't mind explaining. Save this for a time when you won't distract Sensei from the class.
- Do a kneeling bow to Sensei after every demo.

3. Helping students in Sensei's class (but only when asked)

In the dojo, each instructor has preferences about whether and how to do this. It's your job to find out. Some instructors just want you to train. If instructors want help, here are some common ways:

- Work out with individuals
- Roam around the class fixing local problems – people who need a quick fix
- Spot global problems and let Sensei know which parts need more clarification

Regardless of the method, these are essentials:

- If in any doubt, get clarification about the technique from Sensei before trying to help anyone.
- Do your best to help students do exactly the same thing Sensei taught, even if you know a "better" way.
- This is not about you. "I like to do it this way" is a BANNED PHRASE.
- More workout, less talk. Find ways of correcting quickly, so the student can get a lot of repetitions. Class is for learning movements, and the associated concepts can be discussed later.
- Give everyone helpful ukemi. If students are trying to learn the gross movements of a technique, it will not benefit them to have you lock up because you felt an opening.
- Give the correct level of detail. If a child is trying to draw the outline of a human, it is no help to point out how far the eyes should be apart. That is not yet relevant. If a student is struggling with footwork for a technique, it won't help to be told to put their tongue back in their face and relax their shoulders!
- Check in with yourself now and then to make sure you still have beginner's mind for new material, still enjoy training, and still appreciate your teacher!

Being Sensei's assistant is a privilege. You won't always get it right, but you'll learn a lot!