

Why Does *Osaekomi* Work?

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It appears that coaches are rarely asked the direct question “Why does *Osaekomi* work?” It is presumed by many that it is self-evident, by observation and application. However is it really understood “why” it actually works?

When asked, coaches may give an elementary description for the specific technique, or variation of a technique they are teaching at the time. For example when teaching *Kami-shiho-gatame* they may say, “Lock up the head between the ribs and the upper arm; keeping as low as possible, as well as a maintaining wide leg position; simultaneously pulling with the arms and pushing with the hips – this is *Kami-shiho-gatame*, and therefore *Uke* can not escape!”

This type of explanation above does not fully explain “why it works” for *Kami-shiho-gatame*, or other *Osaekomi* techniques. Some *Judoka* do want to know more, and do ask for details as to “why”, and “how”. Coaches often give superficial answers in this instance, or provide simple throw-away-lines such as: “lay on the head”, “squeeze”, “keep your weight down”.

Perhaps this is because the coach has not thoroughly considered this question themselves and they have merely automated the skill, and not previously thought through their answer. They often just apply the technique, without analysing it. They have acquired the skill without questioning it.

Likewise the coach may not have the biomechanical background to understand the physics and anatomy to provide a more detailed answer. Or do they provide these rudimentary explanations because it is simply too obvious, and could become unnecessarily complex if they do?

Following are a few possible answers to the perplexing question of “Why Does *Osaekomi* Work?”

(a) Pain

Uke is in such discomfort, constrained and constricted to such an extent that *Uke* cannot escape; or is solely focused on not submitting before the time is up (Kawaishi, 1955:120).

Some of the most effective *Osaekomi* techniques are where *Tori's* centre of gravity is a long way from *Uke*. Thus the effectiveness is not due to: “being over” *Uke*; “forcing down” on *Uke*; having one’s centre of gravity “on top of” *Uke's*; “laying on *Uke's* head” or similar throw-away-lines for “why *Osaekomi* work”. Part of the effectiveness of such “uncomfortable” *Osaekomi* techniques derives from being far away from *Uke* and inflicting pain from a distance, not from directly on top (see photo 6).

(b) An Imbalance in Power, Mass or Skill.

Tori may have such superior power or strength that *Uke*, no matter how skilful or fit, cannot escape the *Osaekomi*.

Alternatively *Tori* may have so much more weight or mass compared to *Uke*, hence *Uke* cannot escape.

Or *Uke* does not have the knowledge, or skill to effect an escape or avoid being captured in an *Osaekomi* in the first place.

The above reasons could be why we have weight, sex, age and grade divisions in judo competitions. For example: the 50 kilo person, no matter how fit and skilled, is not likely to be competitive against a similarly fit and skilled *Judoka* weighing 100 kilos.

(c) A Mechanical Advantage

Using the analogy of the body as a machine, *Tori* has an *Osaekomi* position striving for Judo's tenet of Maximum-Efficiency (Kodokan, 1955: 13). Efficiency of: levers; energy; the use of space; the use of weight; the use of materials at hand such as *Uke's Gi*, and so forth.

Tori may have a wide base of support and a low centre of gravity while being affixed to *Uke*. This is a very stable mechanical position and there may be various other such stable positions for *Osaekomi* that are equally as effective (see photo 3).

Tori can maintain the mechanical advantage by moving themselves to change the shape of the *Waza* and thus thwart *Uke's* attempts to escape (Feldenkrais, 1952: 55). The shape of *Tori's* technique or position is very fluid, as described by Koizumi (1952: vii). *Tori* uses every part of the body to control the situation and move. Yet at all times remaining affixed to *Uke* by at least one point, and mobile enough to change to other grips and body positions if required. *Tori* uses both legs, both arms, the head as well as the upper and lower torso to facilitate the *Osaekomi*. Being affixed to *Uke* and permitting no significant gaps at the point(s) where the two are affixed (bound together) seems vital to the effectiveness of the *Osaekomi-waza*.

Tsukuri is also an important factor in applying *Osaekomi*. Where *Tori* has carefully and methodically constructed and set up a sound *Osaekomi* position, this is the *Tsukuri* in judo (Kodokan 1955: 45). *Tsukuri* is the standard term in *Tachi-waza* for this activity but is less commonly used in *Ne-waza* (Sheedy, 2010: 2).

For *Osaekomi* *Tori* manoeuvres *Uke* into an adverse position where *Tori* may have a number of complementary and opposing forces contributing to an effective skill (Sheedy, 2009: 3). *Uke* in such an instance may: have trouble breathing; be unable to move their head even a centimetre; are unable to significantly move their centre of gravity; they cannot get their legs into position to break grips or to mount a counter attack and so on.

Without *Tsukuri Osaekomi-waza* may not tend to be so effective; with *Tsukuri* they are more often highly effective.

When pondering the issue of “Why does *Osaekomi* work?”, some may ask “Why do we need to know anyway?” These people may consider Judo as an Art, not a Science and therefore there may not be a scientific rationale. However, knowing “why” does have several implications for: teaching methodology; improving training methods; preventing injuries and avoiding stagnation as well as progressing the sport of judo. Furthermore it answers the question that is intrinsically interesting to some.

There appears no single all-encompassing answer to “Why does *Osaekomi* work?” Perhaps it is a combination of several factors, some of which are mentioned above? But surely the biomechanists in judo are currently diligently researching this question for pragmatic coaches.

In the meantime we can look at those who have gone before for clues. Koizumi (1952) in his Preface to Feldenkrais’ *Higher judo: Ground work*, gives a good, if esoteric, explanation of judo with the analogy of water. This makes sense for *Osaekomi* as well as *Tachi-waza*. Feldenkrais himself in this text endeavours to explain the physics of *Osaekomi* which is a partial rationale.

However, neither of these two eminent fellows provide a full and detailed answer as to “Why” *Osaekomi* works”, not that they probably intended to anyway. The opinions in this text and others, such as Gleeson’s *Judo Games* (1978: 29), do explain why activities such as *Ebi* crawling and diagonal-hand-to-foot drills are vital to escape in *Ne-waza*, in part reflecting “why *Osaekomi* works”. These activities highlight the concepts such as closing gaps (or space) to hold, and making gaps (or space) to escape; which attempt to deal with the point(s) where *Tori* and *Uke* are affixed or locked together.

Conclusion

“Why does *Osaekomi* work?” remains difficult to answer as there are literally hundreds of permutations of *Osaekomi* technique possible in judo. Pragmatic judo coaches may need to work closely with sports scientists to come up with adequate, meaningful and useful answers. In the meantime we coaches should answer this question as best we can.

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Photos: Following are seven pictorial examples to help clarify the issues discussed in this article.



Photo 1: Ushiro-kesa-gatame variation: Arm and head control



Photo 2: Sode-yoko-shiho-gatame: Efficiency of grip and body position



Photo 3: Kami-shiho-gatame: Many opposing and complementary forces at work



Photo 4: Kesa-gatame variation: Controlling the shape of the technique



Photo 5: Kami-sankaku-gatame: Leg triangle binds the players while allowing fluidity



Photo 6: Anchor-grip *Kesa-gatame* variation: Inflicting pain and being distant from *Uke* aid control



Photo 7: *Yoko-shiho-gatame* variation: Head control and fluid shape of the *Waza*