



David M. Valadez
Senshin Center
Dojocho

Some Thoughts on Kuzushi

by David M. Valadez

Kuzushi, or “balance breaking,” is not generated solely in the immaturity of an attacker's skill. That is to say, for example, we should not expect or demand that uke's Line of Gravity fall outside of their Base of Support simply because they missed the target. In the mature understanding of striking, missing the target does not equate with over-extension or that “about to fall” feeling. In the mature understanding of striking, when one misses, one merely strikes again. One does not miss and is then ready to fall. One does not miss and is then prevented from further tactical options. Balance in striking is a matter of being dynamic. Balance in striking then is not a matter of being over-dependent upon any single element – certainly not the single element of hitting the target. Any understanding of Kuzushi that relies totally upon such a premise has to be seen as in need of added sophistication.

In my opinion, two aspects should come to the forefront in our efforts to deepen our understanding and application of Kuzushi. First, let us note that Kuzushi is an Angle of Disturbance. That is to say, Kuzushi should adopt a particular geometry in order to disassociate an opponent's Line of Gravity from their Base of Support. Secondly, Kuzushi should also be understood as a type of Angle of Cancellation. Meaning, aside from issues concerned with balance, Kuzushi takes on a particular geometry in order to prevent an attacker from bringing one or more bodily dimensions (i.e. height, width, or depth) to bear either offensively or defensively. Because Aikido's Kuzushi tends to occur along a spiral, the Angles of Cancellation that are generated via Kuzushi usually occur across all three dimensions simultaneously. In short, and at a minimum, Kuzushi is that angle used to manipulate an opponent's given state of balance toward one's own intentions or desires. In addition, Kuzushi is also that angle used to prevent an opponent from bringing height, and/or width, and/or depth to their attack, follow-up attack, counter attack, or defense.

As we come to understand these important aspects of Kuzushi, it is also very helpful to assume that an attacker's balance is in a state of continuous positive adaptation – that an attacker's balance is always in a dynamic state (i.e. a constant state of falling out of balance and of regaining balance). We should avoid presuming that an attacker can travel from a pure state of balance (i.e. standing straight up) to a pure state of no balance (i.e. going topsy-turvy). Rather, noting that balance is dynamic, we should look to progressively break uke's balance by employing equally dynamic geometries designed toward that end. We should above all avoid static understandings of balance. An application of a static understanding of balance, as when we do not allow uke's center to travel forward and through in Kokyu-ho and only work to push uke backwards at the upper region of their torso, is often over-dependent upon a given training culture. That is to say, it is only in that given training culture that it will find its justification and apparent practicality (i.e. uke will not only travel backwards from our push but also fall down as choreographed).

Aside from becoming culturally dependent, there is another downside to not considering balance dynamically. When an attacker's state of balance is not understood as a dynamic state, such related applications of Kuzushi often come with no Angles of Cancellation. In other words, as balance does not need to be systematically broken, as a training culture simply provides Kuzushi through the graces of uke's prescribed role, nage's application of Kuzushi need not be as complete as it should be. Because uke will travel topsy-turvy, as choreographed, from a state of pure balance to a state of no balance, nage's Kuzushi need not worry about meeting its second aspect: generating Angles of Cancellation. For this reason, we often see nage standing right in front of uke that could bring all of their alternate weapons to bear but do not. In each of our own training, we should be very critical of this violation of proper Kuzushi.

Premises that suggest that one can go from a state of pure balance to a state of no balance and understandings of Kuzushi that see balance as a static thing are going to be grounded in miscalculation and in a lack of maturity concerning things like striking. No good Aikido can come from such a beginning. A truer more tactically valid understanding of Kuzushi is in order. In searching for this understanding, we must remain mindful of how much our egos tend to be served by such incomplete understandings of Kuzushi. In particular, as uke, we should note how our fears, our attachment to "know what is gong to happen," and our emotional resistance to accepting and being in the present, etc., are being supported when we get to travel from a state of pure balance (e.g. standing just fine) to a state of no balance (e.g. launching into the air and going topsy-turvy). In short, being able to fall and/or go topsy-turvy from a state of balance, rather than from state of having one's balance breaking, is a lot less scarier and more in tune with our egocentricity.

We should also note how such things are serving us as nage. As nage, our ego is served by addressing our emotional enslavement to pride. Such incomplete understandings of Kuzushi afford us the luxury of performing big throws even when uke is in a state of pure balance. Here, let us note just how crucial a state of balance truly is to launching ourselves as uke into big high falls! In addition, having openings that our opponent never capitalizes upon provides us with a sense of invincibility. In a way, there is a kind of "silent ego-satisfying contract" that is at work here for both uke and nage in the static conceptualization of balance and the incomplete understanding of Kuzushi. In this contract, uke comes to support their fears as nage comes to support their pride when Kuzushi is not understood dynamically. It will not be easy for us to expose and nullify this contract since there are probably great parts of us that are already invested in it and in our blindness toward it.

It is helpful to realize that Kuzushi, along with Irimi, our Angle of Deviation, and our Angle of Deflection, is not geared toward leaving an attacker's Base of Support unaffected but for what it does to itself. Rather, these things come to deconstruct an attacker's Base of Support in a very proactive, progressive, and often direct manner. To penetrate to a deeper understanding of Kuzushi, one not so dependent upon a training culture, let us begin to ask some very basic questions of our practice. When looking for our Angle of Disturbance, let us ask, "Why is this person losing their balance?" "How are they losing their balance?" "How and why is their Line of Gravity being disassociated from their Base of Support?" When looking for our Angles of Cancellation, let us ask, "Why am I not open to the cross-lateral or the homo-lateral limb?" "Why am I not open to the opponent's tactical transitions (such as going from striking range to grappling range, etc.)?" If a topsy-turvy effect is the end-result of our actions as nage, let us ask, "What brings the head down and the feet past the top apex of the descending head?" If we cannot ask and answer these questions, if we feel they are irrelevant to what we are doing, then, most likely, we are being served too well by the silent contract we have made with our training partners – too well are we reinforcing our fears and our pride in the usual way that we do via our training cultures. However, if we can ask and

answer these questions, not only will we most likely reconcile our habitual ways of supporting our fears and our pride, we will also gain a much-needed scientific insight into our own tactical architectures. With this scientific insight we can gain some much needed distance from the training cultures we require to introduce the art. With this distance from our training cultures, our Kuzushi will mature in both its understanding and its application.