
Troika by Michael J. Hacker

According to my understanding of how Aikidō works, there are 3 parts to every technique: 崩し [kuzushi], 作り [tsukuri], and 掛け [kake]. This month, I would like to talk about my understanding of all three.

崩し [kuzushi] comes from the transitive form of the verb 崩す [kuzusu], meaning "destabilize; break down; undermine;" In my opinion, kuzushi does not, as it is often suggested, mean "balance break." Balance can be broken as a result of kuzushi, but merely breaking someone's balance does not necessarily mean that kuzushi has been applied. To refer specifically to breaking balance in Japanese, I'd probably say バランスを崩す [baransu wo kuzusu] or "break balance."

So what does kuzushi actually mean? And what real-world, demonstrable significance does it have to Aikidō? While I do have my own opinions, allow me to present you with one that has, perhaps, a bit more weight. In his book 柔道の真髄 [Jūdō no Shinzui], commonly re-titled "Canon of Judo" in English, Mifune Kyūzō sensei writes, "崩しとは、相手を変化に 乏しい不安定に誘うことである。" My translation of this is "kuzushi means to entice your partner to become slightly destabilized." Mifune sensei later declares that kuzushi is the very birthplace of technique.

Anyone who has read either the original or new English-language translations will notice that my version is somewhat different. I can only attribute this to my lack of skill as a translator or to my different understanding of the subject matter. I will add that I think Mifune sensei's use of "entice" and "slightly destabilized" is extremely significant. If any other translators would like to weigh in on this, I would certainly welcome the dialogue. (Special thanks for both the idea and the time I was allowed with his treasured book goes to Chuck Clark sensei.)

作り [tsukuri] can refer to the structure or "build" of something and also to "making" or "creating." The English word I like to use, however, is shamelessly stolen from my teacher: "fit." (More often than not, 直訳 [chokuyaku] or "direct translation" doesn't work very well for explaining Japanese concepts in English.) In my mind, once kuzushi has been applied, tori is then free to "fit" to or "make" the shape required by the technique. For example: as uke attacks, you break his posture, then assume the shape of kotegaeshi. If kotegaeshi is inappropriate (i.e. doesn't "fit"), you will likely end up forcing

the technique... and that's just not very aiki, now, is it?

掛け [kake] -- means "to start," but can also refer to "hanging" something. In this context, however, "to hang" seems very awkward in English and doesn't, in my opinion, convey any useful meaning (see "chokuyaku" above). For these reasons, I prefer to use "start." After all, this is the point at which the technique starts. Notice I said "technique starts," not "you start doing the technique." The difference is significant and indicative of my understanding of Aikidō. Once you've applied kuzushi (or "kuzush'd him," as I like to say) and have fit to the shape of the appropriate technique, as we often say in our dojo, "kake happens."

Michael Hacker began his study of Aikidō in Japan in 1990, and has been very fortunate to get his hands on many skillful teachers in his short time on the tatami. His primary Budō influences are Donald Moriyama, Amano Shigeko, Saito Morihiro, C.E. Clark, and Stan Connor. He has also had limited exposure to Kōdōkan Jūdō, Mugai-ryū Iai-Hyōdō, Shōrin-ryū Kishaba-juku Karate, Hapkido, Tae Kwon Do, Tai Chi, and various Chinese martial arts. Among his other loves are song-writing, his Chet Atkins nylon-string, techno-geek stuff, his world famous Bad Budō video collection, studying languages, and Swan (if he knows what's good for him). Michael is a student at the Jiyushinkan in Tempe, Arizona.