

KUZUSHI

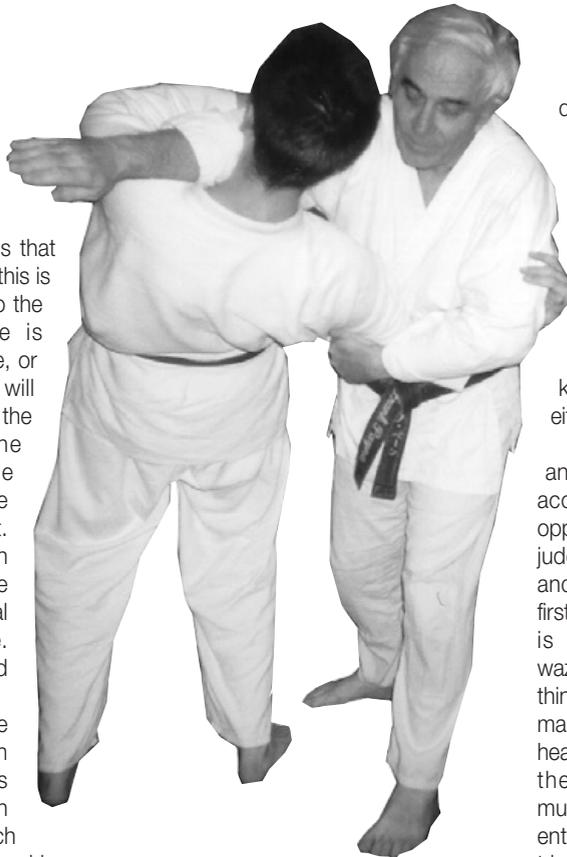
AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN ALL MARTIAL ARTS TECHNIQUES

By Franklin W. Payne

There are many secrets in any martial art. No matter what the style of martial art, a practitioner will encounter many things that are unexpected, even exotic. Indeed, this is one of the things that draws people to the martial arts. Whether the style is Japanese, Okinawan, Korean, Chinese, or from any other part of the world, it will have secrets that define and organize the style. Which style is best for the practitioner depends on what the practitioner wants, and what purpose draws the practitioner to the martial art. While the particular secrets of each style define that style, there are some factors that are common to all martial arts, no matter where they originate. One such factor is in Japanese called Kuzushi. This means off-balance.

Kuzushi often makes the difference between success and failure in application of a technique. Kuzushi is the opposite of something which in Japanese is referred to as Hara, which technically means stomach. Hara is used in the martial arts to mean on-balance. Hara, stomach, is used because the Japanese believe that the center of balance is approximately two inches below the navel and two inches inside the body. If one were to put a sword through the body from the front centered two inches below the navel, and another centered from the side at the same level, where the two swords crossed inside the body would be the center of balance. So long as one keeps one's head leveled directly over this center, one is on balance.

Obviously, the whole point of kuzushi is to get the opponent's head off this center to back, front, or either side. Where the head leans, the body will follow. There is a saying; "Head over floor, fall to the floor." This means one must keep the head directly over the center of the body to avoid toppling in combative practice. Kuzushi is taking this



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balance away from an opponent and making the opponent's head go off this center. It is one of the most important elements in any martial art. It is also one of the most difficult elements to achieve and maintain.

The most important reason that Kuzushi is one of the more difficult principles in the martial arts to learn and practice is that it requires an almost constant conscious

discipline about what really unbalances an opponent and what is merely a muscled waste of energy. In karate, or other styles that emphasize striking, if a karateka strikes an opponent who is on balance, there will be some effect. If, on the other hand, the karateka strikes that same opponent when that opponent is off balance, the effect will be much greater. There are a number of ways a karateka can achieve this off-balancing either prior to, or as part of, the strike.

If a judoka or aikidoist wishes to throw an opponent, the throw might indeed be accomplished to some extent even if the opponent were on balance. However, if the judoka or aikidoist wants maximum effect, and assurance of success, kuzushi is the first principle required for that success. This is so important an element of nage waza, (throwing technique), that it is the first thing taught about nage waza. Yet far too many karateka, judoka, and aikidoists, in the heat of the moment, let kuzushi fly away on the excited wind of adrenalin-spurred muscle. The karateka strikes, the judoka enters the foot, hand, or hip, the aikidoist tries to flow into the opponent's movement, and all three anxiously throw kuzushi to the wind, while relying on muscle strength. Far too often, by the time the second effort is applied, with some greater technical application of kuzushi, it is too late. The counter move has already been delivered. The karateka has been struck, instead of striking, or the judoka has been swept off the feet, or the aikidoist has been stopped cold by failed flow of movement.

The least obvious of these examples is that of the karate strike. The karateka can achieve kuzushi either by slipping his opponent's strike, thus leading the opponent to overbalance and leave an opening for a counter-strike, or by blocking in such a way as to off-balance the opponent, or by grabbing and pulling the opponent into the strike. The dead-hand block is one prime example of this kind of kuzushi in action. This form of block not

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only hurts and deadens the striking arm or leg, it also tends to upset the opponent's balance by dropping the shoulder or hip from sheer reflex reaction to the block's stunning effect. In any event, the opponent so blocked tends to lean one way or the other and lose balance accordingly (Picture 1). The strike that follows such a block tends to put the opponent down, whether it breaks anything or not.

The far easier way to illustrate kuzushi, both proper and failed, is with nage waza. In throwing techniques, unbalancing the opponent is very necessary to get the opponent to go down.

The number one reason a throw fails is because kuzushi was either non-existent or, at the very least, insufficient. In most instances, if kuzushi is not adequate, most opponents are simply not going to take a fall!

What keeps kuzushi from being adequate is, again, adrenalin-spurred reliance on muscle power, instead of trained brain power. Too often, the martial artist trying to throw an opponent tends to yank, or jerk, or drag on an opponent, pulling down, instead of tipping the opponent in the proper direction (Picture 2).

Often Tori, (the one trying the technique), will even lean on Uke, (the one on whom the technique is being applied), in trying to muscle Uke off the feet. That this is utter nonsense is a pointless observation in the heat of the contest, whether that contest is competition for points or combat, even for life. Tori does not lean on purpose. This leaning is part of the same mistake as the muscled tugging. Tori has let the training about kuzushi slip away in the anxiety of the moment. The result can be disastrous. The only cure is training, and more training, and still more training, until kuzushi is as automatic as breathing.

So, if one does not tug, what does one do? For the most part it amounts to lift and pull, or lift and push, or lift and turn. Yes,



stymied. If one is to bring about kuzushi by a downward action, it must usually include some sort of joint twisting action, such as the outward wrist turn, called kote gaeshi. When the wrist is turned outward until the thumb is toward the mat, or ground, as the case may be, Uke's shoulder drops, and the head is definitely taken off center. Where the head turns, the body must follow. In addition to being a very painful wrist joint lock, kote gaeshi is an extremely

effective way to take Uke off balance. If Uke does not go with the turn of the wrist, that wrist will only turn just so much before it breaks! Even if Uke is willing to take a broken wrist, either out of stubbornness, or just ignorance, the turn of the body occasioned by the turning of the wrist is going to destroy Uke's balance anyway, and Uke will still go down (Picture 3). Of course, the same thing applies to elbow

twists, shoulder twists, even knee and ankle twists. The trouble with this joint lock form of kuzushi is that an ignorant opponent, unschooled in the effects of joint locks, may

there are some ways in which dropping a person in a downward motion can bring about kuzushi; witness the dead hand block. However, most of the time, if Tori tries to drag Uke down, Tori is going to be

end up with a broken bone or dislocated joint before realizing the need to go with the unbalancing effect and take the fall.

This is a very important consideration for any Tori applying kote gaeshi or similar technique with the intention of dropping an opponent, as opposed to deliberately trying to break an opponent's bones in some way. Lift is much safer.

So what can be done by the martial artist who got into the martial arts in the first place because of being too small to pick up and throw away a big two-hundred-plus pound bully? How does such a martial artist pick up and pull, or pick up and push, or even pick up and turn such an opponent?

This is one of the most secretive aspects of the secret of kuzushi. At least it is one of the least remembered aspects of kuzushi. Therefore, it is also the aspect of kuzushi

that most often gets Tori into trouble. Lifting for purposes of kuzushi does not require picking Uke up and bouncing the head off the ceiling, or spinning the body around and heaving it across the room. That is muscle again. Lifting, for purposes of kuzushi can, AND SHOULD,



most often be done with two fingers of each hand. The purpose is not to lift Uke off the feet. The purpose is to tip Uke either forward, backward, sideways, or around. The more subtle this lifting can be made, the more effective it will be. If Tori can manage to tip Uke off balance without Uke even being aware of being off balance, the chances of the throw succeeding are far greater.

A Tori skilled in kuzushi can be a hundred and ten pound weakling and throw a three hundred pound Uke. Stories of this happening in dojo after dojo abound in the martial arts. Mifune Sensei, of Kodokan fame, was renowned the world over for being of diminutive size, yet repeatedly taking on and defeating judo-trained sumo wrestlers by judicious use of kuzushi!

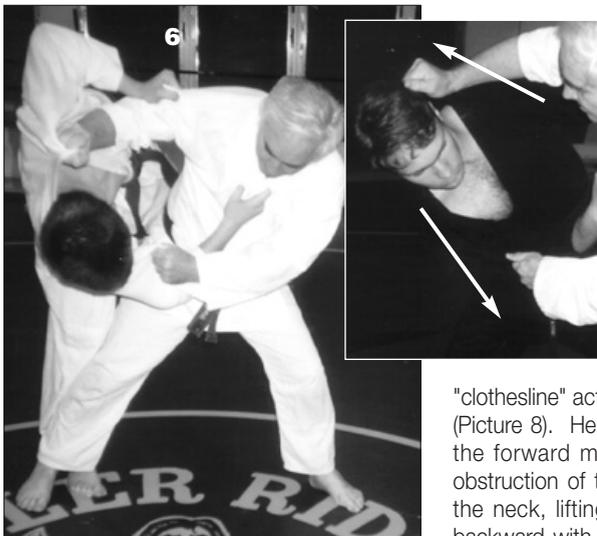
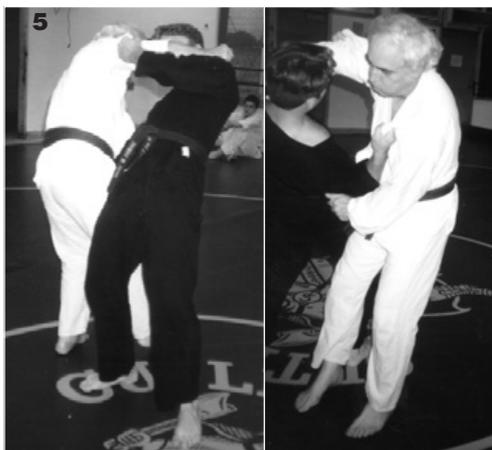
The most frequently used forms of kuzushi are (Picture 4) directly toward Uke's



front, and conversely, directly toward Uke's rear. These are followed closely by tipping Uke toward Uke's right front, and conversely toward Uke's right rear. Of course, whatever can be done to the right, can equally well be done to the left. For purposes of this article, most of the illustrations will be shown to the right front or right rear, as the particular technique may require. For the same application to the left front or left rear, simply reverse everything.

One illustration common in almost every Oriental martial art is the throw the Japanese call O Soto Gari (Picture 5), which is used precisely because it is common in some variation or other in almost every martial art to come out of the Orient. It applies kuzushi to Uke's right or left rear. O Soto Gari means Big or Major Outside Reap. The kuzushi is applied by pulling Uke's right elbow in toward Tori's stomach, while turning Uke's left lapel backward by LIFTING it, tipping Uke onto the heel of the right foot, which will then be knocked out from under Uke by a powerful leg reap, calf to calf, taking Uke off both feet, leveling off at about Tori's waist level, and slamming Uke to the mat or ground with teeth-rattling impact! However, for purposes of this article, the relevant part is that of the kuzushi involved. Note that, while there is a draw of the elbow toward Tori's stomach, there is also LIFT of the lapel in a backward direction, to unbalance Uke toward the right rear. The lift is not a weight-lifter pick-up, but rather just a tipping of Uke onto the heel, picking up off the balls of the feet toward the rear. Breaking Uke's balance in this manner gives much greater assurance of a successful throw than great expenditure of energy or excessive application of muscle against the mass of Uke's body weight.

A throw toward Uke's right front is the one the Japanese call Tai Otoshi (Picture 6), which means body drop. To achieve the kuzushi for this throw, one must not draw straight down. This merely makes Uke heavier and harder to throw, because it plants Uke more firmly flat on the feet. Once again, the lift is essential. This time, while Tori's left hand is drawing Uke's right arm forward, Tori's right hand is lifting Uke's left lapel up and forward to corkscrew Uke's body toward the right front. Even before Tori has placed the foot, Uke's balance is shot, and Uke is as good as thrown if the technique is continued to completion. Indeed, with Tai Otoshi, often Tori can bring about the complete throw without ever even placing a foot across Uke's right foot, just by properly applied kuzushi and proper turning of Tori's own body into the throw. However, for best assurance of a good throw, proper placing of the foot across Uke's foot keeps Uke from stepping forward and recovering balance, thus nullifying the throw. Proper



entry into a throw is, in fact, part of the methodology of kuzushi, as will be addressed in the next technique to be discussed.

Another forward throw is one the Japanese call Koshi Guruma (Picture 7), or Hip Wheel. This technique, while still requiring the lift in kuzushi, also depends on the insertion of Tori's body in the proper manner for the throw to effectively work. In this throw, Tori does not merely pull Uke up and block with the hip to twist Uke around Tori's body and expect Uke to fall down. Uke would be just about as likely to jump around the hip and counter Tori as to fall down. In this throw, Tori's entry is part of the kuzushi. As Tori circles the arm about the neck of Uke, and proceeds to insert the hip in front of Uke, it is not merely a placement of the hip for pivotal effect. Tori STRIKES Uki's loins with the hip, in and up, to

force Uke to rise onto the balls of the feet, lifting the heels, and, essentially, doing the unbalancing in a forward direction by Uke's own reaction to the strike of the hip into the body. The rest of the kuzushi is accomplished by the pivoting action of Tori's hips, spinning Uke around Tori's hips to crash land somewhere to Tori's left front corner.

Kuzushi is better illustrated with hand type throws than with either foot techniques, such as O Soto Gari, or with hip techniques, such as Koshi Guruma. Aiki Nage, an aikido "spirit throw", is such an example.

In this throw, Uke ends up falling back toward the rear. This is a throw with which Steven Segal has wowed audiences in several action films. It can be accomplished in more than one way, but always depends on kuzushi. In some instances Uke is made to accomplish the kuzushi by Tori evading a rush and countering with a reversal type

"clothesline" action of the arm under the chin (Picture 8). Here the lift is accomplished by the forward motion of Uke opposing the obstruction of the arm at the focal point of the neck, lifting and directing Uke's head backward with a twist of the forearm under the chin.

The same effect can be achieved by pulling Uke's head down and around toward Uke's front, sometimes in a circular motion, and then reversing with the forearm under the chin to direct Uke's head up and back in the counter direction. Always the head is lifted in a backward direction, and often the back of the head is aimed by the forearm motion directly at the ground or mat surface. Therefore it is essential that Uke be well skilled in falling techniques before such a

technique is practiced with full force. Such throws are beautiful, an almost choreographic art form, as well as a martial art form. Such throws are also, however, devastatingly effective, and can often be dangerous to Uke. Great care must always be used in practice, and Uke must always most certainly be adept at falling techniques before practice. This caution is repeated here simply to emphasize it. The fact is



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that the danger of poor falling technique resulting in injury is increased when kuzushi is improperly applied or missing altogether. This is especially true wherein, during an exhibition, Uke is trying to be nice and facilitate the demonstration by jumping for Tori. A well trained Uke can fall better when proper kuzushi is applied than when Uke has to improvise and fake the kuzushi for Tori.

In either competition or real combat, the objective is not to put on a show, but to defeat an opponent. If no concern for the welfare of Uke is paramount, effective execution of technique is paramount if one is to win.

Either way, kuzushi is a principle of martial expertise no martial artist can afford to either ignore, or even practice casually. It is a difficult part of martial arts to learn, and a very necessary one to keep honed to razor edge. Proper, constant, practice is the only way to be sure of the lift and turn necessary to make kuzushi work every time!

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Franklin W. Payne holds rank in Kodokan Judo from the United States Judo Association (USJA) and Ji-Jitsu from the Yoshitsune-Ryu Ju-Jitsu International Federation of Ju-Jitsuans. He is a Certified Senior National Examiner for both organizations. He is the head instructor of Bushido Florida Dojo: Cutler Ridge Middle School, 19400 Gulfstream Rd., Miami, Fla 33157 • 305-235-4761

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