

Throw versus Release:

The Effect of Language and Intention on Aikido Practice

Beth A. Shibata
Aikido Shin Jigen
Redondo Beach, California

Words are words—or so most people presume. For the most part, the use of words, their meanings, and the effects of their use seem transparent. Typically, these are not generally issues examined in any detail, especially in a martial arts environment. What is not obvious is that common words can and do affect behavior during martial arts practice in ways that are both significant and profound. While this is a topic of heated debate in a number of academic fields (Bickerton 1995, Pinker 1994), the effects words and their meanings have on aikido practice is particularly relevant.

Accepting the argument that words and the concepts they embody (essentially creating a semantic field) influence how people behave, the terms that direct aikido techniques affect the manner in which practitioners execute those techniques. Because aikido uses what are often quite specific sets of instructions (technique names), the effects that words have on actions are quite visible. In fact, practitioners behave quite consistently with the concepts embodied by a technique's component words. "Throw" (Jap. *nage*) is one of those words. This is particularly evident as the technique draws to a conclusion. In some cases, the end result is consistent with the art's goal of creating harmony; however, in other instances the final move undermines whatever harmony had been intended. The action "throw" both denotes and connotes

movements that do not agree with aikido's founding principles, as throwing one's partner is inherently inconsistent with maintaining harmony.

Many martial art techniques end with the term "throw" to indicate the manner of concluding a technique. Not surprisingly, a throw is the expected action that results. For most martial arts this presents no problem; in aikido, this is a source of unintended conflict. The conflict comes not from aikido being a martial art but from the mismatch between aikido's goal of harmony and the action of throwing one's partner. In its place the term "release" has been proposed (Shibata) to replace "throw" because its meaning leads to actions more in alignment with aikido's philosophy of harmony.¹

Harmony (Jap. *ai*), as practitioners know well, is a key philosophical, spiritual and physical component of aikido. Like many Japanese words, the word "aikido" is composed of several characters, in this case *ai*, *ki*, and *do*. In the interest of accuracy, it is important to note that both *ai* and *ki* are semantically rich terms that have a number of overlapping meanings. However, in the interest of simplicity and clarity, in this paper it will be explained in equivalent terms as the way (*do*) of harmony (*ai*) with the life force (*ki*).² Restoring and preserving harmony after an attack is fundamental to the nature of aikido, as is the need to remain safe and not injure the attacker. While aikido shares many features with other martial arts with regard to timing, breath control, distancing, and focus, perhaps the most significant way it differs is with regard to ending the attack with the first movement, which is accomplished at the outset with *kuzushi* (Jap.), breaking balance. What happens next also differs as a function of intention. Intentions are consistent, reasoned attitudes that are consonant with what one means to do and the plan and

actions subsequently taken (Bratman 1990). In aikido practice the intention is to preserve harmony throughout the course of the technique.

Further, aikido has an additional distinction from most martial arts—the intent to preserve harmony. The intention is explicit in the very name of the art as well as implicit in the practice. This intention is enacted through shared cooperation (Bratman 1999). During practice, most martial arts have an intentional element of cooperation which is necessary in order to learn the art and develop the skills to execute movements in their martial sense. However, the intentional element is not typically one of shared cooperation. Students cooperate because it is in their best interest. At other times they compete against one another. Aikido, on the other hand, encourages shared cooperative behavior between students because they not only respond to others actions and intentions (as in an attack), they also pursue goals together (training), and support one another's efforts (Bratman 1999). Such behaviors are necessary to learn how to establish and preserve harmony. That aikido is noncompetitive is an added feature of aikido that emphasizes its shared cooperative behavior.

Shared cooperative behavior plays out during each technique. In class practice, as in other martial arts, aikido primarily employs spoken (and less often, written) cues to direct the actions of the participants with regard to a simulated attack and response. These cues typically form of a sequence of spoken Japanese words and phrases and are instructions to the practitioners. The phrase takes on a specific four-part form that describes the technique, which is typically the last term, and additional information for the practice that indicate the orientation, direction of movement, and the attack form the technique should take. Such a phrase might easily be:

Katate tori | *ai-hanmi* | *kokyu nage* | *omote* (Jap.).

1 | 2 | 3 | 4

This description delineates the four necessary instructional components of the complete movement: the attack form (*katate tori*, wrist grab), the relative body alignment (*ai-hanmi*, matching stance), the technique (*kokyu nage*, breath throw), and the direction the technique flows (*omote*, across the front of the partner).³ What is of interest is part of the technique's nomenclature: the term *nage*, "a throw, a fall" (Kenkyusha 1968).⁴ *Nage* is the nominal form of the verb *nageru*, throw. In each technique the term for the manner of conclusion is either implicit, as in *ikkyo* (Jap.), first lesson, or explicit as in *shihonage* (Jap.), four-direction throw. In addition to the instruction set for the person receiving the attack, there is *uke* (Jap.), the partner who simulates the attack. In this context *uke* means "the person who receives the technique" and is the nominal form of *ukeru* (Jap.), receive.⁵ It is, however, the term *nage* and its consequent variations in physical expression both by students and instructors that often leads to conflict between the philosophy of aikido and the intent of aikido practice.

O-Sensei created aikido as a martial art of acceptance and reconciliation (Nishio 2004). Westbrook and Ratti (1970) describe this as the highest of the four levels of ethical defense, the lowest being an unprovoked attack, along the lines of the best defense being a good offense. The highest level of self-defense requires not only technical skill, but also the ethical intention to preserve oneself without causing injury to the attacker. In this ideal scenario, one practitioner takes the role of *nage*, the one who is being attacked. *Nage* accepts the fact that someone is approaching to attack (*uke*), and accepts the attack, although not in a way that allows harm. The

attack is received in a way that both neutralizes it at the outset and allows *nage* to stay safe, as well as to respond with counters (Jap. *atemi*) for protection, if necessary. The response ideally draws the attacker off balance and the subsequent spiraling movement keeps *uke* in that state of imbalance until the attack is completely neutralized and reconciled. Reconciliation may have *uke* being guided to a pin, or allowed either to roll away or fall back. In this process, neither party is injured and the attack is thoroughly neutralized. However, there appears to be a conflicting message in the term *nage* and its English equivalent, "throw," that interferes with and negates the compassionate philosophical grounding of aikido. When a partner is thrown, the meaning of the word is fully realized though varying degrees of force. It is those varying degrees of force that often disrupt the harmonious intent of aikido, and move the actions outside the boundaries of the art.

THROW versus *RELEASE*

When one responds to the instruction to throw something, the word "throw" invokes a complex psychological state and an equally complex set of physical behaviors (Luria 1982). With it comes an embedded set of semantic elements which includes the intention of applying force, which is not consonant with harmony. In addition, the behavioral aspects of words, verbs in particular, are so deeply internalized that they lead to reflexive, nonconscious behaviors (Lewicki 1986). The noun "throw" and the verb "throw" denote a specific, near reflexive behavior or action, as do their Japanese equivalents, which are commonly used in a number of martial arts. In most of these arts, "the throw" is the finish, the point at which maximum force is applied. This is the completion point of the technique. Historically, these arts evolved from kill-

or-be-killed situations, so the application of force at this point is understandable. However, when the same terminology is applied from other martial arts to the completion of a technique in aikido, a conflict arises between the philosophy and the language used to convey it. In aikido, accelerating force applied to one's partner at the end of the technique is less than desirable, as the energy *nage* adds to *uke's* momentum violates the harmony of the movement, and consequently violates the core philosophy of the art.

A brief examination of the meanings of "throw" reveals the inherent problem. Among the synonyms in a collegiate dictionary are the verbs: cast, fling, hurl, pitch, sling. Each contains a variation of the core meaning "to cause to move swiftly through space by propulsive movement or propelling force" (Merriam 1994). The "propulsive movement," which is a part of the core meaning of the word, destroys the harmony when applied to aikido movements. Added force applied near the termination point of the technique is not needed to stop the attack and neutralize the attacker; it is far too late for that to be effective. The attack should be neutralized much earlier – at the opening – so that the application of technique provides genuine resolution rather than contributing its own measure of violence.

The action of throwing also involves the semantic components of a subject, an object, and a location – the thrower, the thrown, and the destination, respectively. The subject thrower (*nage*) applies energy to the object thrown (in this case, *uke*) and directs that energy and object to a location away from him or herself. Directing the path of the throw involves following the arc of the movement even after the person is let go. Following through is an important aspect of the act of throwing, as it completes the transfer of energy from the thrower to the thrown. It is the transfer of excess energy from *nage* to *uke*, who literally receives it, that leads to highly

dynamic, visually spectacular, sometimes unpleasant, and potentially injurious rolls and falls. While they are impressive to watch, such actions and their consequences contain an unintended measure of violence that may negate the purported goal of the technique. This kind of outcome is problematic for students of aikido whose philosophical stance and purpose is to preserve and restore harmony.

One has to consider how this conflict between language and action evolved. Although aikido is rooted in several martial arts, the spiritual philosophy of its founder is deeply embedded in it as well. After O-Sensei's vision in 1925, which led to a radical redirection of his martial art, he grew more dissatisfied with the violent aspects of *bushido* (Jap.), despite initially intending his training to benefit high-ranking military leaders.⁶ In the early 1930s the contradiction between his *budo* (Jap.), which encouraged peace, and Japan's shift toward a state of war, greatly disturbed O-Sensei. In 1942, even as O-Sensei formally established the name aikido, he withdrew from public life and dedicated himself to the development of his art. At the end of World War II, Japan was devastated, but aikido emerged in 1948 and began finding its way around the world as a vehicle to promote peace (Ueshiba 1991, Stevens and Krenner 1999). O-Sensei had created a vibrant, spiritually-based martial art, but the work was far from complete.

One of those incomplete areas concerns the conflict between the intention to preserve harmony and the difficulty in achieving it in practice. This problem may arise because aikido's techniques seem similar to techniques in many older, traditional martial arts. However, as has been discussed, the art O-Sensei created is radically different from most traditional arts in terms of its intention. While most martial arts developed from the basic desire to survive against an

enemy, aikido was developed to transcend the need for violence. However, aikido's terminology is still firmly embedded in the language of the traditional martial arts, and students respond all too readily to those survival-based behavioral cues. So, while O-Sensei's thinking and techniques constituted a paradigm shift in martial arts from combative self-defense to proactive self-defense, the terminology remained in the old language of the traditional martial arts. Consequently, the thinking attached to those traditional terms also remains embedded in a pre-aikido mind set.

It probably did not occur to O-Sensei that the basic terminology of aikido would need to be framed in a new and different way to match the art he created. As a result, practitioners often place aikido in a generic martial arts paradigm that uses common terminology. However, keeping the language of traditional martial arts results in dissonant outcomes – inflicting violence when one really intends to create harmony, which subsequently prevents the aikido paradigm from fully emerging (Kuhn 1970). In the decades since aikido's creation, and despite its popularity and growth, the use and conventional expression of the term "throw" has often prevented students from achieving the harmony they so earnestly set out to study.

Although aikido is intended as an art of harmony, practitioners fail in that regard when the movements are unnecessarily forceful. This behavior is sometimes expressed while demonstrating techniques and sometimes comes under the heading of realistic or hard training, often drawing on the old model of *bushido* adapted from the samurai era. However, theoretically, in aikido the fact that one's partner is acting as an attacker is irrelevant, making such practice questionable. For aikido to be expressed as an art of acceptance and reconciliation, it is essential that *nage* not throw the attacker, for throwing is not an action of reconciliation, but an action of force that exposes and exerts power and ego. In such cases, when harmony is sacrificed in this

manner, *uke* is treated discourteously, and the aikido fails in its purpose, devolving into a combative art.

The practitioner is left to wonder: if throwing is undesirable, what alternative is there? An alternative interpretation and use of the term *nage* and "throw" has been proposed and implemented by Minoru James Shibata (personal communication), which resolves the problems entailed by the term "throw" and offers the possibility to end this conflicted interpretation. In this case, the term "release" is offered because it resolves the points of conflict that "throw" creates. The semantic components needed remain in tact for "release": there is still a subject, the releaser; an object, the releasee; and the location, the destination. Here, instead of energy being added just prior to the conclusion of the technique, *nage* uses the existing flow of energy generated from the opening to the completion of the technique to release *uke*. The assumption is that sufficient energy exists from the opening and *nage* exerts control over that energy. Then *nage* begins to fulfill the intention of releasing: "the action of setting free, let go, let loose" (Merriam 1994). "Release" contains none of the propulsive energy that conflicts with the creation and maintenance of harmony⁷ but does allow for following through. This is far more consistent with the goals of aikido as a compassionate and ethical martial art. The cumulative energy of the movement and the tightening spiral *uke* inhabits is ultimately eliminated as *uke* is released and falls away of his or her own necessity. In this instance, using the word "release," preserves the harmony and realizes the philosophy. If *nage* releases, harmony is preserved, as is *uke*. Thus, the semantic elements ingrained within key terms shape the nature and intention of the action. In this instance, key words and their meanings shape the quality and intention of the ensuing actions.

The semantic fields of the two words "throw" and "release" lead to significantly different results, only one of which is consistent with aikido's philosophy.

CONCLUSION

While there are other words that lead to unintended actions, this discussion suggests that there is a deeper issue not quite brought out for examination. Aikido, because of its philosophy and its emphasis on treating even an attacker with courtesy, if not kindness, represents a fundamental shift in terms of what has been understood as a martial art. Such a shift in represents a radical change in thinking and takes time to fully enter and permeate the culture (Kuhn 1970). However, there seem to be psychological, social, and cultural impediments within the martial arts community as a whole that might account for not readily seeing or embracing a new paradigm. It may seem strange that a language issue such as this could create such a prickly obstacle. Yet, the change in terminology from "throw" to "release" represents a continuation of the paradigm shift O-Sensei started when he created aikido. While this paradigm shift is still in its early stages and may not be easy for many to appreciate or accept, it holds hope for the future that O-Sensei's intentions to bring his martial art of harmony with the universe to the world may yet be more fully understood and expressed.

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End Notes

¹ Wierzbicka (1991) suggests that certain core terms do not translate well from their native language. However, the terms referred to here are common terms, not core terms, so it is not as likely that they will be misconstrued as Wierzbicka suggests. Although the interpretations may not be exact, sufficient overlap exists for a meaningful discussion.

² Aikido is a core term in Japanese and, as expected, its component characters are conceptually and semantically complex. They do not have simple one-to-one English equivalents, hence the existence of multiple valid translations and interpretations.

³ The term *kokyu nage* (breath throw) is actually non-specific as it refers to timing and the flow of a movement (Nishio 2004). Some have explained it as the moment of exhalation as the technique is executed. In essence, it refers to all techniques. All techniques, regardless of the specific form they take, can be considered *kokyu nage* as breath control and breathing are underlying principles of every martial art (Random 1977:190-193, 213). However, as the arts evolved, more specific terms have emerged and entered common usage. They serve to distinguish and delineate various types and classes of movements. This has led to the paradoxical situation of aikido having at its core only one technique and also having the potential for an infinite number of techniques.

⁴ Kenkyusha's definition is somewhat different, although there is sufficient overlap of the semantic field of its English equivalent "throw." *Nage* is defined as "a throw, a fall, giving up, resigning" (1968). This semantic field suggests less energy is output at the end, although in practice this may not be the result.

⁵ Like the term *nage*, the term *uke* has an overlapping semantic field to its English equivalent. In this case, its meanings include "reception, defense, a defensive move, fail to make a proper defense" (Merriam 1994). Additionally, *ukeru* overlaps sufficiently, including the meanings "receive, be given, have, take, get, obtain" including "suffer (an injury)" (Kenkyusha 1968).

⁶ The expression *sho no bu*, the *budo* of the leadership (the *sho* of *taisho* (Jap.), literally, generals) has been stated frequently by Sensei Shoji Nishio at his seminars, suggesting that early on O-Sensei had a top-down approach to spreading the philosophy of aikido. With its widespread popularity after World War II, one could make a case that each practitioner of aikido is responsible for acting in ways that reflect the responsibility of a leader.

⁷ It is interesting to note that in English the word "release" has the same linguistic root as "relax", which also carries the sense of "letting go" but in quite a different manner (Merriam 1994).

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