

Rediscovering Kodokan Judo

by

Llyr C Jones PhD

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Introduction

It is well known that the word *judo* comes from a combination of two Japanese words – *ju* meaning gentle and *do* meaning path or way. This makes judo literally the *gentle way*.

At the level of first principles, the essence of *Kodokan*¹ *Judo* [1] is the turning an opponent's strength and overcoming by means of skill rather than sheer strength. This theory is captured by the Japanese expression *ju yoku go o seisu* – usually translated in a number of ways e.g. *softness overcomes hardness, flexibility overcomes stiffness, gentleness controls strength or win by yielding*.

Watching the seemingly effortless combination of grace, technique and power of a true judo expert in action it would be very easy (but very wrong) to underestimate the intense physical and mental demands that judo makes upon its exponents. Achieving excellence in judo demands considerable single-mindedness, and achieving mastery of all of the throwing, grappling and striking techniques that makes up the discipline demands serious and arduous training over an extended period of time under the guidance of an experienced and knowledgeable teacher.

Judo is now practised in almost every country in the world. However, the aim of this paper is to question the direction that judo has taken and to challenge whether a significant re-orientation is required?

The State of the Nation

As a starting point it is worthwhile stating the definition of judo as provided by the *Kodokan New Japanese-English Dictionary of Judo* [2]:

judo –a martial art formulated by Jigoro Kano based on his reformulation and adaptation of several classical jujutsu systems as well as his own philosophical ideals.

Such a definition may not resonate well with today's concept of judo promoted by the sports orientated judo governing bodies – the majority of whom seem to be actively encouraging the distancing of judo from its martial arts origins. Indeed, in these early years of the 21st century it is difficult to challenge the view that judo is now promoted one dimensionally, as a sport - organised around championships and competitions. The problem is compounded in that the sports governing bodies measure the health of their country's judo only in terms of results at major championships.

¹ Kodokan – the headquarters of judo – originally founded in 1882 by Jigoro Kano who himself had established Judo.

A direct consequence of this is that the governing bodies focus their investment only on the handful of elite athletes who have the potential to be World or Olympic medallists.

For the majority of *judoka*, judo is now just about medals and prizes and most focus their attention on only the small subset of judo that is relevant to the sports competition context - thereby ignoring the other elements of judo such as *atemi waza* (striking techniques).

It is also a matter of concern that most judo governing bodies have biased overwhelmingly their rank promotion (i.e. grading) structures towards accelerating the advancement in grade of those who are successful in competition, with often only *lip service* being plaid to the breadth and depth of an individual's technical judo knowledge. Bethers [3] writes:

This emphasis on "Contest Proficiency" has caused the true meaning or purpose of Judo to be unclear and somewhat out of proportion to what was intended by Dr. Kano. This problem is surfaced nowhere more clearly than in "notion" that contest victories are rewarded with rapid rank promotions.

Currently there is little prospect of advancement in grade for those who (through age, physical condition or personal preference) wish to practise judo as an art as opposed to a sport. This is of course with the notable exception of the promotions that governing body officials and administrators seem to receive as a matter of course. The risk one runs with such a policy is a resultant judo hierarchy that is both one-dimensional in its knowledge and skewed in its priorities.

It is especially disappointing that those judoka who prefer to focus their study on the more traditional and technical aspects of judo (e.g. *kata*) have become tagged with the label *recreational players* - with an implication that they are somehow inferior to *contest players* and not worthy of attention and recognition.

The Turning Tide

There is a significant emerging awareness that sport aspects of judo have overrun what judo is all about. Yasuhiro Yamashita, arguably the greatest judo competitor the world has ever known² writes [4]:

Today there is too much of a focus on creating "champions". There is more to learn in Judo than just being champion only. I would like to teach the real meaning and spirit of Judo...

In formulating this view Yamashita recalls the words and influence of his mentor, Dr Shigeyoshi Matsumae [4]:

"As an athlete, the goal of becoming champion is not everything in life. There are more important aspects of sports such as the diffusion of the educational aspects of judo, making many friends through judo and making a contribution to world peace through sport and judo."

² Between October 1977 and his retirement in April 1985 Yasuhiro Yamashita won 203 consecutive judo matches. He won a gold medal at the Los Angeles Olympics and was a three-time World Judo Champion.

Again Bethers [3] writes on this theme:

It seems that some modern Judo Leaders have narrowed the objective of Judo to only "Contest Proficiency". For many, world-wide Judo has become equated with contest proficiency. Although this belief is today wide-spread, it is the very thing that Dr. Kano warned against throughout his life. Dr. Kano stated, "Judo should only be a means to the end of skill and principles for higher self-development, and any 'drift' toward 'contest' Judo as the 'sole' interpretation of Judo should be carefully regulated." This "drift" has become a major focus among many well intended Judoka, but in the minds of many Sensei, technique has suffered and Judo has become (more often than not) a sport in which "win at all costs" is the underlying objective.

Back to Basics

Statistics show that today judo is an activity in decline. Therefore there is a real need for a more balanced approach to be taken whereby judo re-emphasises its traditional martial art roots. By returning to traditional Kodokan Judo the needs of everyone, with all interests in judo, can be accommodated – not just the competitors and the elite athletes.

For this purpose, Traditional Kodokan Judo is defined as [5]:

... simply the practice of Kodokan Judo as described in the text Kodokan Judo [1] without an overwhelming emphasis on the sport of Judo. It is about studying the history, etiquette, waza and kata of Kodokan Judo and enjoying them for what they are - knowledge, skills and a way of life based on principles taught by Kodokan Judo's founder, Jigoro Kano.

In calling for a more balanced approach it is not the author's aim to decry the considerable merits of competitive sport judo. The author recognises that success in contest over several traditional *jujitsu* schools was key in establishing Kodokan Judo as an effective combat system [1] and also that the advent of sports competition was instrumental in the global proliferation of judo. Rather, it is to argue that judo based solely on sport is not judo in toto and that the over-emphasis on the competition aspects has unjustly pushed aside and undermined the original judo ideas conceived and formulated by Kano.

Other writers for example, Burkland [6] support this line of reasoning.

Kano's Judo

Elementary research will reveal that the underlying concept of judo as envisioned by Kano was that it was to be a means of (primarily cooperative) physical and social education – in simple terms *a training for life*. Kano captured this principle of *mutual welfare and prosperity* via the maxim *jita kyo ei* [1].

Kano's view was that success in contest (*shiai*³) was simply a by-product of training, never the point of it [7]. As an example, Minoru Mochizuki began judo in 1912 aged just 5. Later he studied directly under Kano and also Kyuzo Mifune, the notable 10th Dan. At 19 Mochizuki joined the Kodokan and in less than two years he was promoted to *sandan* (3rd Dan) - then an outstanding achievement aged just 21. At this point Kano told him "You have the makings of a leader... in the future you will be a top teacher here at the Kodokan".

Kano asked Mochizuki to report to him once a month concerning his training progress and to guide him concerning the true purpose of judo and the pitfalls of sports. This led to a series of meetings at which the philosophically oriented Kano attempted to stimulate the mind of the young Mochizuki who, at that time, could only think of winning tournaments.

As a direct student of Kano, Mochizuki Sensei, aged then just 23, made his own perceptive observation in 1930, still apt today:

One situation leading to delinquency involves a young person dropping out of his group of friends on a sports team. Some coaches are only interested in training team members in the question of winning and losing. They pay no attention to those who drop out because they are only interested in winning. In sports there is no place for the weaker or the less competent. Personally, I would rather see various sports transformed into Martial Arts, so that they become more concerned with spiritual development and the prevention of bad behaviour. They should be more concerned with developing young people who are no trouble to their parents, who get along well with their siblings, and with promoting good relations between husbands and wives.

Point made earlier in this paper indicate that today's judo is no longer aligned with Kano and Mochizuki's original ideas - a line of reasoning supported by Smith [8]:

The popularization and spread of judo has weakened Kano's base so greatly, I see no chance of it ever recovering. Judo is now merely a jacketed wrestling sport. The competitive has ousted the cooperative.

Martial vs. Art

Bates [9] argues that judo has two essential components – martial and art. The martial component of judo can be related to combat through the way of the warrior (*budo*) - the contemporary representation of which is *shiai*. In preparation for contest the modern judoka focuses on the development of physical conditioning and fitness, motivation, tactics and technique for the sole purpose of securing victory. Conversely, art can be defined as technical excellence and understanding of techniques developed through repeated practice (*uchi-komi* and *nage-komi*), free practice (*randori*) and of course kata.

Judo is of course both martial and art, but today the concept most people have of judo is martial. Martial represents but one small element of judo, yet almost without exception, most judo teachers

³ It must be emphasised that the original concept of *shiai* was a contest (bout) whereby the efficacy of one's judo skills were tested against an opponent. This is different to the contemporary interpretation of *shiai* as a sporting championship.

focus on developing the contest prowess of their students and many believe it unnecessary to practice or even know any kata.

Rediscovering Kata

Kata has a vital role to play in re-balancing judo and is a core component of any classical judo programme. In the most general sense any cooperative judo training e.g. a sequence of combinations or counters etc. between partners can be considered kata. However, a greater degree of focus is provided in [2] which defines kata as follows:

kata – ...Formal movement pattern exercises containing idealised model movements illustrating specific combative principles.

Kata is not unique to judo – it is recognised as a valuable training drill in most of the Japanese martial arts, however the exact nature of kata training varies from art to art. For example, *karate* kata is a solo form (like shadow boxing) whereas the judo kata are usually performed with partner - each partner having a specific role and performance objective depending on which kata is being performed. In judo, there are kata for throwing techniques, groundwork techniques, self-defence as well as others that illustrate the fundamental principles of judo [1, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15].

For completeness a comprehensive list of the kata practiced in judo is now given, together with a summary description of each [15]. It is worth noting that a broad repertoire of judo techniques that have disappeared from modern sports judo continue to survive in the kata.

Note that not all of these kata were created by Kano or the Kodokan and as such some are not official *Kodokan Kata*. Note also that the last six kata in the list are seldom practised (outside Japan) and even there, few judoka would be familiar with them.

- ***Nage no Kata:*** The kata of throws. Includes examples of hand, hip, leg and sacrifice throws.
- ***Katame no Kata:*** The kata of grappling. Includes examples of holds, strangles and chokes and joint locks.
- ***Kime no Kata:*** The kata of decision. This is the *traditional* judo self-defence kata. Includes both standing and kneeling defence against empty handed, knife and sword attacks using strikes, chokes, joint locks and throws. Note that the Kime no Kata is also known as the Shinken Shobu no Kata (Combat Forms).
- ***Kodokan Goshin Jitsu:*** The *modern* Kodokan self defence kata. Includes defence against empty hand, knife, stick (*jo*), and pistol attacks using strikes, joint locks and throws.
- ***Ju no Kata:*** The kata of gentleness. Includes a number of attacks and defences demonstrating the efficient redirection of force and movement.
- ***Itsutsu no Kata:*** The kata of five principles. This kata is intended for the demonstration and practice of body movement (*tai-sabaki*) and for the application and redirection of energy as in nature.

- ***Koshiki no Kata:*** The ancient kata. This kata has its origins in *Kito-ryu* jujitsu and demonstrates the techniques of *kumiuchi* or fighting while wearing armour (*yoroi*) and is intended to illustrate the ancient origins of judo techniques.
- ***Gonosen no Kata:*** The kata of counters. This kata includes counter throws for a number of common techniques.
- ***Kaeshi no Kata:*** An alternative kata of counters.
- ***Nage-Ura no Kata:*** Another kata of counters due to Kyuzo Mifune.
- ***Seiryoku-Zenyo Kokumin-Taiiku:*** The national exercise based on the principles of maximum efficiency. This kata is atypical of judo in being a completely solo kata and comprises of a variety of striking and kicking techniques.
- ***Kodokan Joshi Goshin-Ho:*** The Kodokan's women's judo self defence kata. This kata includes a number of escapes from holds and grabs, some basic striking techniques and one throw.
- ***Renkoho:*** The kata of arresting techniques. This kata includes a number of control and submission holds useful in restraining criminals.
- ***Kimi-Shiki:*** The kata of decision. This kata emphasises the use of body movement in responding to attacks and includes both kneeling and standing defences against empty hand, knife and sword attacks
- ***Shobu no Kata:*** The kata of attack or contest.
- ***Go no Kata:*** The kata of force or blows. This kata includes a variety of *atemi-waza* or striking techniques.

In nearly all of the martial arts kata is used as a training tool from the novice stage upwards. However, in judo its significance has long been under-emphasised and kata practice is now largely confined to very high grades or those who are not contest-inclined. It is a tragedy of modern judo that in the headlong rush into Olympic-type competition most *dan* grades regard kata as an anachronism (of little relevance to competition) that should be discarded. The late Charles Palmer (then President of the British Judo Association) anticipated this situation when he wrote his 1982 foreword to Leggett (and Kano's) kata text [11]:

...too much emphasis is being placed on winning at all costs. Not enough time is being spent by Judo players on acquiring the vital self-discipline necessary to proper performance of the sport, and the ability to continue enjoying it later in life after the ability to win contests has decreased.

It was particularly insightful of Palmer to recognise that Performance Judo is age limited. Such sport judo is the domain of the young whereas Kodokan Judo (especially kata) can be done up until a very advanced age.

A direct consequence of kata not being part of the normal activity of most judo clubs is that the availability of people with the required knowledge and teaching skills is very limited. In the early years of the 21st century judo even some of the better known judo kata are in serious danger of becoming extinct as the opportunities to learn and benefit from their practice have become quite rare.

The Importance of Kata

To gain a true understanding of judo as envisioned by Kano it is necessary to look beyond competition to kata. This author believes that the link between judo's past and future is embodied in the accurate teaching of kata for it is only in kata that the totality of judo has been preserved.

Kano identified two types of training for judo – kata and randori and held the firm belief that the two training system had to co-exist in parallel. Kano envisaged kata *being the laboratory* for judo development and randori as *the testing ground* [10].

In particular, Kano developed kata to demonstrate the principles of judo and to provide a type of training in which students could examine techniques under ideal circumstances – thus penetrating their very essence.

Through repeated practice, the techniques of the various kata can be performed without thinking and, in the extreme, kata can unify mind, body and spirit – arguably the purest goal of a martial art. Indeed many judoka claim to have experienced moments of enlightenment and insight as a result of a *perfect* kata performance. Notwithstanding the subjective spiritual dimension it is certainly true that both judoka involved can derive a great deal of self-satisfaction from a high quality kata performance and the associated focus, awareness, attention to detail and self-discipline demanded. Furthermore, students and teachers should also not overlook the significance of kata as purely a part of general instruction as kata teaches movement, timing and coordination. Kata was, and remains the basis of judo, and provides the vehicle for perfecting many throws, holds and other techniques in a finer way than individual technical instruction or general randori.

Critics of kata argue that kata bears very little resemblance to shiai in that the techniques are performed at a standard pace with a pre-determined outcome in an overly symbolised style. However, it is unlikely to be widely known that most high-grade Japanese teachers still emphasise the importance of kata for a judoka's development and that many consider the study of the *Randori no Kata* (Nage no Kata and Katame no Kata) in particular to be an essential part of training for the highest level of contest success [10, 12].

In their seminal text *Judo Formal Techniques* Otaki and Draeger [10] state that:

Sufficient kata study and practice impose a well-defined technical discipline on the judoist, one that is unattainable by only randori and contest methods. This discipline, instead of hampering the judoist, actually frees him from undue restrictions, liberates his bodily expression in movement, and teaches him economy of mental and physical energy. This process can only be understood through experience, and only through kata performance can judoists come to appreciate Judo in its fullest sense.

The point is reinforced by Kawaishi [12] who wrote:

The Kata will temper the combative ardour of the young performer and will undoubtedly also enable him to discover the reason for certain errors he commits in competition... Thus the Kata is a valuable source of technical progress.

Accordingly, the contest player should consider kata as part of his training for physical, mental and contest proficiency in an identical fashion to randori and conditioning work etc.

Conclusions and the Way Ahead

Given the substantial decline in the number of adults practising judo it can be argued that there is a real need to re-examine the value system associated with judo. A way must be found to retain and ideally attract more adults into judo. As part of this exercise the emphasis between the martial and art strands of judo should be examined simultaneously because the two strands should not be separated.

Metaphorically one can argue that judo is like a cake - you can not make it without **all** the ingredients and no one ingredient is more important than the other. Extreme polarization in either the direction of shiai (or the direction of kata) is unbalanced and will result in a destructive division of judo. The conclusions of Burkland [6] are particularly relevant:

Judo must focus on its heritage as a traditional martial way by emphasising randori and kata as the primary training vehicles for the development.... Shiai must be returned to its proper perspective and cannot be allowed to dominate our thinking and our efforts.

Recognition should also be given to the arguments of Gleeson [16]. Gleeson showed that there was a close connection between the three dimensions of judo and argued that randori, shiai and kata were all essential to each other. Gleeson recognised that through ignorance and neglect, artificial boundaries had been built between the dimensions, preventing people moving easily from one to another. Gleeson also acknowledged the need to deconstruct these boundaries for judo to prosper.

A similar idea has been expressed metaphorically by relating judo to a three-legged stool [17] - the three *legs* being randori, shiai and kata. The metaphor proceeds to argue that if any one leg is removed, the stool falls over. This can be directly interpreted that without equal emphasis in all three elements judo will be flawed. The interested reader requiring a further perspective on Kodokan Judo - including the introduction of a concept of four overlapping areas for study (i.e. physical education; sport; unarmed combat and philosophy) is also directed to the contribution of Anderson [18].

Additionally implicit in the re-evaluation of judo's value structure is a real need to reassess and reformulate the promotion system. In doing so a fundamental tenet of Kano's philosophy should be to the fore:

It's not that you are better than someone else that's important but that you are better than you were yesterday."

The principles expounded in this paper are already starting to come to the fore with the emergence of the Martial Arts International Federation's International Traditional Kodokan Judo (ITKJ) programme [19], which does not have an overwhelming emphasis on the sport of judo.

To conclude, judo today faces a crisis no different to that facing Jigoro Kano in 1882 when he founded judo from jujutsu. In evolving judo from jujutsu, Kano endeavoured to preserve the fundamental elements of jujutsu lest they be lost forever. Today, the ITKJ is taking similarly radical steps to re-establish and preserve the heritage, traditions, techniques and kata of judo that were the true genius of Kano.

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