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COMPETITION, KATA AND THE ART OF JUDO

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INTRODUCTION

The word “judo” comes from a combination of two Japanese words—*ju* meaning gentle or supple and *do* meaning path or way. This literally defines judo as the “gentle way.”

At the level of first principles, the essence of Kodokan* judo is turning an opponent’s strength against himself and overcoming the opponent through skill rather than sheer strength (Kano, 1986). This theory is captured by the Japanese expression *ju yoku go o seisu*—usually translated as “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. Achieving mastery of all of the throwing, grappling, and striking techniques that makes up the system demands intensive and demanding training over an extended period of time under the guidance of an experienced and knowledgeable teacher.

Judo has been well established in the West since the early 1900’s and is now practiced in almost every country in the world. The aim of this paper, however, is to question the direction that judo has taken in the West (especially in the United Kingdom) and to challenge whether a significant re-orientation is now required. Where specific statistics or statements are used to support an argument, data and examples from the British Judo Association (BJA)—the national governing body for the Olympic sport of judo in the United Kingdom—are used.

* KODOKAN: THE HEADQUARTERS OF JUDO, ORIGINALLY FOUNDED IN 1882 BY KANO JIGORO WHO HIMSELF HAD ESTABLISHED JUDO.

THE STATE OF JUDO TODAY

As a starting point, it is worthwhile stating the definition of judo as provided by the *Kodokan New Japanese-English Dictionary of Judo* (Kawamura & Daigo, 2000):

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 the image of judo promoted by the official accredited national governing bodies—i.e., those belonging to the International Judo Federation (IJF)—the majority of whom seem to be actively encouraging the distancing of judo from its martial arts origins. In these early years of the 21st century, it is difficult to challenge the view that in the West (and in the United Kingdom in particular) judo is promoted one dimensionally, as a combat sport—organized around championships and competition—often for competition’s sake. To reinforce this sporting dimension, the competitive style of judo is often referred to as *Olympic Judo* or *Performance Judo* (a style in its own right).

A direct consequence of the leadership and policies of the accredited judo governing bodies is that, for the majority of judo practitioners, judo is now just about medals and prizes. These bodies measure the health of their country’s judo simply in terms of results at major championships and accordingly focus their investment only on the handful of elite athletes who have the potential to be World or Olympic medalists. Bethers (n.d.) recognizes this issue:

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 [practitioners], but in the minds of many sensei [teachers], technique has suffered and judo has become (more often than not) a sport in which “win at all costs” is the underlying objective.

It is evident that the strategy of focusing on Performance Judo must now be challenged, as judo today is an activity in decline. In the United Kingdom, this is manifested by decreasing adult membership of the British Judo Association—75% of the BJA membership is under the age of 16 (British Judo Association, n.d.)—and the continuing lack of consistent and substantial success of British judo players in international competition despite all the effort directed to this end.

It is a matter of additional concern that the governing bodies have overwhelmingly biased their rank promotion structures (i.e. grading) toward accelerating the grade advancement 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. Again, Bethers (n.d.) 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 for grade advancement for those who (through age, physical condition, or personal preference) wish to practice 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 judo players who prefer to focus their study on the more traditional and technical aspects of judo (e.g. forms or *kata*) have become tagged with the label recreational players—implying that they are somehow inferior to contest players and not worthy of attention or recognition.

BACK TO BASICS

This author and other writers (Watanabe, 2003; Burkland, 1998) advocate the thesis that judo in the West has lost its way and that there is a real need for it to return to its martial art roots. In doing so, the author's aim for this paper is not to decry the considerable merits of Performance Judo—indeed success in contest over several traditional jujutsu schools was key in establishing Kodokan judo as an effective combat system (Kano, 1986). Rather, it is to argue that judo based solely on sport is not judo *in toto* and that the original and arguably truer meaning of the art lies elsewhere.

Elementary research will reveal that the underlying concept of judo as envisioned by Kano was that it was to be a means of (cooperative) physical and social education—in simple terms, a training for life. Kano captured this principle of mutual welfare and prosperity via the maxim: you and I shining together (*jita kyo ei*, mutual welfare and prosperity) (Kano, 1986).

Indeed, with the overwhelming majority of those now practicing Performance Judo, it is reasonable to conclude that mainstream contemporary judo has now deviated significantly (and quite possibly permanently) from Kano's original ideas. Smith (1999: 221) notes:

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.

Figure 1
Nage no Kata

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Bates (n.d.) 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 competition (*shiai*). In preparation for contest, the modern judo player 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 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 focus on developing their students' contest prowess and many believe it unnecessary to practice or even know any kata.

REDISCOVERING KATA

In the most general sense, any cooperative judo training between partners—e.g. a sequence of combinations or counters etc.—can be considered kata. However, a greater degree of focus is provided in a dictionary of judo (Kawamura & Daigo, 2000), 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 recognized as a valuable training drill in most Japanese martial arts. The exact nature of kata training, however,



Figure 2
Katame no Kata

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 the kata. In judo, there are kata for throwing techniques, groundwork techniques, self-defense, as well as others that illustrate the fundamental principles of judo (Kano, 1986; Otaki & Draeger, 1983; Leggett & Kano, 1982; Kawaishihi, 1982; Fromm & Soames, 1982; Ohlenkamp, 2005).

For completeness, a comprehensive list of the kata practiced in judo follows, together with a summary description of each (Ohlenkamp, 2005). Illustrations of techniques from the seven most common kata are provided in Figures 1 to 7.

Note that not all of these kata were created by Kano or at the Kodokan and, as such, some are not official Kodokan kata. Note also that the last six kata in the list are seldom practiced outside Japan and, even in Japan, few judo players would be familiar with them.

- *Nage no Kata*: The kata of throws. Includes examples of hand, hip, leg, and sacrifice throws (Figure 1).
- *Katame no Kata*: The kata of grappling. Includes examples of holds, strangles, and chokes and joint locks (Figure 2).
- *Kime no Kata*: The kata of decision. This is the traditional judo self-defense kata. It includes both standing and kneeling defense against empty handed, knife, and sword attacks using strikes, chokes, joint locks, and throws (Figure 3). *Kime no Kata* is also known as *Shinken Shobu no Kata* (Combat Forms).



Figure 3
Kime no Kata

Figure 4

Kodokan Goshinjutsu



- **Kodokan Goshinjutsu:** The modern Kodokan self-defense kata (Figure 4). It includes defense against empty hand, knife, stick (*jo*), and pistol attacks using strikes, joint locks, and throws.

- **Ju no Kata:** The kata of gentleness. It includes a number of attacks and defenses demonstrating the efficient redirection of force and movement (Figure 5).

- **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 (Figure 6).

- **Koshiki no Kata:** The ancient kata. This kata has its origins in Kito-ryu Jujutsu and demonstrates the techniques of fighting while wearing armor (*kumiuchi*), and is intended to illustrate the ancient origins of judo techniques (Figure 7).

- **Go no Sen 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.

- **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 a variety of striking and kicking techniques.

- **Kodokan Joshi Goshin-Ho:** The Kodokan's women's self-defense 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 emphasizes the use of body movement in responding to attacks and includes both kneeling and standing defenses 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 striking techniques (*atemi waza*).

Figure 5

Ju no Kata





Figure 6
Itsutsu no Kata

In nearly all martial art styles, forms are used as training tools from the novice stage upwards. In judo, however, its significance has long been under-emphasized 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 ranked black belt holders regard forms as an anachronism of little relevance to competition that should be discarded. The late Charles Palmer (then BJA president) anticipated this situation when he wrote his 1982 foreword to Leggett and Kano's kata text (Leggett & Kano, 1982):

... 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.

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Figure 7
Koshiki no Kata



It was particularly insightful of Palmer to recognize 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. Today some of the better known judo forms are in serious danger of becoming extinct.

For the reader's interest, teaching sequences for two techniques from *Kodokan Goshinjutsu*—two-hands hold (*ryote dori*) and uppercut (*ago tsuki*)—are provided in Figures 8 and 9. Similarly, teaching sequences for two techniques from the *Koshiki no Kata*—strength dodging (*ryokuhi*) and water wheel (*mizu guruma*)—are provided in Figures 10 and 11. These sequences were performed under the technical direction of world masters international kata judge Bob Thomas.

Two-Hand Hold

8a Bob Thomas (right) and Eddie Cassidy approach each other.

8b The attacker steps with his left foot forward into the proper distance to simultaneously grab the defender's wrists and tries to strike with his right knee to the groin.

8c The defender bends his right arm hard toward his chest to free it and,

8d continues his motion to strike the attacker's right temple with the knife-edge of his right hand.

8e The defender grabs the attacker's right wrist from the top with his right hand and applies an armlock (*kote hineri*). He steps back with his right foot and opens his body to his right. The defender clamps the attacker's right arm under his left arm and twists the attacker's wrist. The attacker is forced to submit, or have his arm broken.





Uppercut

9a Eddie Cassidy (right) and Bob Thomas approach each other.

9b The attacker steps with his right foot forward into the proper distance to simultaneously throw a right uppercut. The defender steps slightly back with his left foot and deflects the attacker's uppercut from below with his right hand.

9c Immediately, the defender grabs the attacker's right wrist with his right hand, thumb down, and the attacker's elbow with his left hand. He twists the attacker's wrist away from him and pushed the attacker's elbow toward his face.

9d While keeping his arm extended and locking the attacker's elbow, the defender takes a big step forward with his left foot and throws the attacker forward.



Strength Dodging

10a Eddie Cassidy (right) and Bob Thomas approach each other.

10b The attacker steps forward, left foot then right, and attempts to grab the defender's belt with a cross grip—right hand uppermost. The defender simultaneously pulls the attacker's right arm forward.



10c The defender pulls the attacker forward to his right side, while placing himself behind the attacker. He holds the attacker's elbow bringing the arm upwards while holding the attacker's upper left arm.



10d The defender pulls the attacker backward to the right side while dropping to his left knee as the attacker falls to the ground.



10e As the defender kneels, the attacker sits up, keeping his legs spread with straight legs, toes up.

Water Wheel

I 1a Eddie Cassidy (right) and Bob Thomas approach each other.

I 1b The attacker steps forward with his left foot then right, and attempts to seize the defender's belt with a cross grip—right hand uppermost. The defender simultaneously pulls the attacker's right arm forward.

I 1c The attacker resists by pulling backward. The defender responds by changing his direction of movement, lifting the attacker's right arm, and presses it toward the attacker's forehead.

I 1d The defender moves in closer and unbalances the attacker by bending the attacker at the waist with his left hand and pressing the attacker's right arm against his own forehead with his right hand. This makes it easy to push to attacker backward.

I 1e The defender bends the attacker backward and the attacker responds by resisting and straightening up and inclining forward a little. The defender then takes advantage of the attacker's forward inclination and changes his grip. He also adjusts the position of his feet.

I 1f The defender then falls backward and executes a sacrifice throw.

I 1g The attacker rolls over the defender in mid-air.

I 1h The attacker

comes onto his feet and the defender remains on his back with legs and hands spread for about three seconds. This concludes the action.



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—especially the traditional and more dangerous self-defense techniques that are also present in judo.

Kano identified two types of training for judo—forms and free-practice—and held the firm belief that these two training systems had to co-exist in parallel. Kano envisaged kata being the laboratory for judo development and free-practice as the testing ground (Otaki & Draeger, 1983).

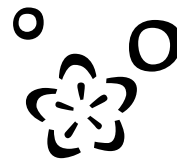
In particular, Kano developed kata to demonstrate the principles of judo and to provide a type of training in which students could examine techniques under ideal circumstances—thus penetrating their very essence.

Through repeated practice, the techniques of the various forms 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 judo practitioners 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 all judo players 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 forms as purely a part of general instruction: 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 free-practice.

Critics of kata argue that forms bear very little resemblance to competition in that the techniques are performed at a standard pace with a predetermined outcome in an overly symbolized style. It is not widely known that most high-grade Japanese teachers still emphasize the importance of kata for a judo practitioner'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 (Watanabe, 2003; Otaki & Draeger, 1983; Kawaishihi, 1982).

In their seminal text *Judo Formal Techniques*, Otaki and Draeger (1983) state:

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 judoist come to appreciate judo in its fullest sense.



Kawaishi (1982) reinforces the point:

The kata will temper the combative ardor 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 free-practice and conditioning work, etc.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Given the substantial decline in the number of adults practicing 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 strands should not be separated. In doing so, one would be well served to note Burkland's (1998) conclusions:

Judo must focus on its heritage as a traditional martial way by emphasizing *randori* [free-practice] and kata as the primary training vehicles for the development.... *Shiai* [competition] must be returned to its proper perspective and cannot be allowed to dominate our thinking and our efforts.

Gleeson (1976) showed that there was a close connection between the three dimensions of judo and argued that free-practice, competition, and forms were all essential to each other. Gleeson recognized that, through ignorance and neglect, artificial boundaries had been built between the dimensions, preventing people from 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—the three legs being free-practice, competition, and forms (Kin Ryu Judo, n.d.). The metaphor proceeds to argue that if any one leg is removed, the stool falls over. Therefore, without equal emphasis on 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 Anderson (n.d.).

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 at the fore:

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



—British Judo Association, 2004

The principles expounded in this paper are already starting to come to the fore with the emergence of a number of bodies dedicated to the preservation of the traditional techniques and values of judo as a martial art. Such bodies could provide a more natural home for the judo purist than the official sport-orientated governing bodies.

Judo today faces a crisis no different than that facing Kano Jigoro in 1882 when he founded judo from jujutsu. In evolving judo from jujutsu, Kano endeavored to preserve jujutsu's fundamental elements unless they be lost forever. In the West, similar radical steps are needed to re-establish and preserve the heritage, traditions, and forms of judo that were Kano's true genius.



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