Judo-Ron 59 - Kodokan Pilgrimage

July 2012 marked the 130th birthday of the Kodokan Judo foundation by the young scholar Jigoro Kano, a graduate of the Japanese Imperial University. In 1882, Kano Shihan had succeeded in transforming the old martial arts of Jujutsu as taught by various Koryu establishments in Japan and introduced his Kodokan Judo as a transformed art of self-defence, a physical education system and a way to make intelligent use of energy for the benefit of the nation.

Judoka around the world have been informed or learned of the importance of the Kodokan and of Kodokan-judo style associated with their combative sport-art. Today, the word is universally linked with the systems of Judo techniques being performed in dojos around the globe. It is a manifestation of the monumental works initiated by Jigoro Kano. Kodokan Judo is also made up of philosophical, research and educational dimensions and it has a physical structure or central institute in Tokyo Japan which house historical data, lecture rooms and is the residence of the most prominent judo experts of our time.

People around the world travel to different places to realize their goals associated with their dreams and aspirations. They set their goals and then embark upon a journey of sort that will lead them to other people, physical sites or objects that will give them intellectual, moral or physical satisfaction.

The Kodokan Institute in Tokyo became such an attraction to many of us. A planned visit there is on the mind of so many judoka. By their visit, judoka will seek a personal renewal; others will go to fulfill a quest for more knowledge; to satisfy their curiosity, while others may seek to make contacts with elders and exchange with colleagues. Whatever the reason for their stay, the journey will provide an opportunity to discover; to identify and make links with its historical dimensions; to meet and exchange with the current judo experts; to receive instructions and technical guidance’s. For most, it is an occasion to renew their skills.

The Kodokan is not a religious shrine; it is an educational institute rich in tradition and knowledge. It is a central repository of the Bushido spirit via its educational and ethical transmission of Judo principles as conceived by Jigoro Kano and transferred to us since 1882 by his various teaching teams.
Kodokan, the physical structure

The statue of Jigoro Kano at the entrance. The physical building of the Kodokan in Tokyo.

As a structure in the heart of Tokyo, the Kodokan is neither an outstanding nor a remarkable building attracting constant photo shots from pedestrians. It is a modest multi stories building that looks like most other learning academy or educational accommodation with the exception that there is a large statue of the founder Jigoro Kano at the principal entrance.

From a humble beginning with a training surface of 12 tatami located in the annex of the Eishoji temple of the Kamakura district in 1882, it has grown into an eight stories accommodation in the Bunkyo-Ku district. It now contains over 1200 tatami of training surface and other facilities such as: research laboratories, museum, library, dormitory, administrative offices including housing for the All Japan Judo Federation.

The building is easily accessible from both the street level and the Tokyo Metro system. It stands close to the famous Tokyo Dome Baseball stadium, the La Qua leisure resort and the quiet repose of the Korakuen garden started in 1629 by the MitoTokugawa family, the regent Shogun of the era where you can still view the inscription:

“Rest in the garden for enjoying power later on.”

Shu Shunsui, philosopher
The Emblem

At the top of the southern façade, one can recognize the Kodokan emblem introduced in 1940 for the celebrations of the 2600 years of the Japan Empire. The interpretation commonly given is that it embodies the red sun at its centre (Japan’s distinctive national symbol) and a white outside mirror in the form of the cherry blossom, a sacred symbol of past Shinto deity. The red colour is also the symbol of the Japanese devoted spirit of courage while the white petals forming the mirror represent the continued transmission of the Samurai trait of indifference to death and their continual mission of providing peace and security to others. The Kodokan badge or crest “mon” is now recognized as the insignia of the Kodokan judo fraternity around the world. When used in conjunction with different ceremonies, the emblem is sometime garnished with the Japanese writing symbols “Ju Do “.

Kodokan Legacy

Since its inception by Jigoro Kano, the Kodokan’s reputation has been fortified by several luminaries of which Tsunejiro Tomita the first student, Shiro Saigo the great competitor, Sakujiro Yokohama the great technician, Yoshitsugu Yamashita the frequent partner of Jigoro Kano in Kata demonstrations and the 15 individuals who have received the highest degree of 10th dan including: Yamashita, Isogai, Nagaoka, Mifune, Iizuka, Samura, Tabata, Okano, Shoriki, Nakano, Kurihara and Kotani.

In 2006, another three outstanding judo performers were promoted to 10th dan: T. Daigo, I Abe, and Y Osawa. Their daily inputs into the educational syllabus can still be viewed and felt on the tatami today.

“Those who are enlightened never stop forging themselves”

M. Ueshiba, Art of Peace, Pocket Publications, 1992

The museum and library of the Kodokan contain over 7000 works of reference pertaining to the development of judo across the world including personal writings and mementos of the founder. Personal calligraphies made by Jigoro Kano using his “nom de plume” Konan and conveying the principle Jun Do Sei Sho (follow a reasonable path to winning) can be viewed. There, one can also read abstracts of the bulletins of the Association for Scientific Studies on Judo and view selected technical videos and martial arts journals.
Training at the Kodokan

The Kodokan has a continuous training syllabus. The facilities are used by students of all ages. There are monthly specialized Shiai, special training seminars, evening general practices, winter and summer training camps as well as international courses. The teaching staffs are normally composed of high dan holders and a number of assistants who diligently provide personal and group consultations. The institute is not known to be a stable to form competitive judoka. There are numerous affiliated universities and private dojos that carry that denomination. Judoka enrolled in high level competition do make an effort to attend selected Kodokan classes or the free training periods to polish their styles or tactics.
International Kata Course

In the past, I made the occasional trips to the Kodokan to perfect my understanding and my skills. My last visit was in 2006. Upon my return, I wrote a book “L’Essentiel des Katas-Judo” which can be accessed at WWW.Scribd.com

This year, I attended the concentrated international kata course held in July 2012. The course was reserved for Kodokan members holding the 4th dan and higher ranks and it ran for a whole week. There were 250 participants from 20 countries composed principally of kata- pairs /competitors and senior teachers desirous to pursue their development and acquire a better understanding of the judo principles and forms.

Following in the legacy of Jigoro Kano who gave us the spiritual consciousness and the ritual practices for definite forms, this year’s syllabus maintained the azimuth on the esthetic and artistic values of the Kami No Michi or the way of the ancients. The course directors were the three senior 10th dan holders: T. Daigo, I. Abe and Y. Osawa assisted by several 9th dan holders amongst which were S. Matsushita and S.Yamamoto sensei as principal instructors being aided by a group of senior 7th and 8th dan holders.

The Ambiance

All the participants were eager to engage in the training program and provide mutual assistance as required. Regardless of their age or rank, they respectfully accepted criticisms and applied the suggested corrective actions and repetitions needed to improve their comprehension or demonstration. It has often been said that the purpose of training is to tighten up the slack, toughen the body and polish the spirit and that it should be undertaken in a vibrant manner and with sincere camaraderie. This is exactly the kind of ambiance that prevailed during the whole week.

The kata philosophy somewhat rests on the principle that all techniques must be defined by the right posture, the accurate displacement of the body, the precision and accuracy in the execution. There is an expression that sums it all up: Waza No Ri. It is therefore expected that all students and kata judges have the abilities to perform all the techniques well in order to be capable of correctly judging the demonstration. The text books on kata and the formal videos produced about kata performances gives us a general explanation as to what principles must be highlighted in the demonstration and in what sequences the techniques must be presented.
Zuihitsu- Random Notes about Judo by Ronald Désormeaux

The Kata course provided us with complementary clarifications and live demonstrations that were commented step by step by the most senior experts in their field. Hereunder are the salient observations retained that if properly introduced in our future kata training, are sure to contribute towards our improvement.

**Summary of main observations**

1. For the Randori-No- Kata, comprising the Nage-No-Kata and the Katame-No-Kata, we were reminded that the application of proper Kuzushi is an imperative. The harmonious flow between action and reaction at the right time must be pursued with a judicious response being offered to all forms of resistance. The proper manipulation of Kuzushi must be reflected in the three sequences: with the seizure of the opportunity, the body displacement and at the contact point for the final execution of Kake. It is important for Tori to demonstrate his fluid adaptation and his degree of control over Uke’s reactions while maintaining his own stability and balance via potential changes to his positional angles.

2. In the case of Ju-No-Kata, we were repeated of the importance in estimating the right distance between the performers. It must be followed with the correct use of the principle “JU”. The latter being associated with body displacement, linear or circular movements, and the intelligent use of energy. There must be the amalgamation of the opponent’s strength or the capacity to absorb it at a point where one can maximize the use of Kuzushi.

3. With the self-defence kata expressed in the Kime-No-Kata and the Kodokan Goshin Jutsu, we were inspired about the importance of the Jisei or self-control as well as adopting a calm response to the attacks from Uke in order to demonstrate the proper attitude of determination and courage before the danger (Yuki). Anticipatory reactions as well as imprecise attacks must be avoided. Both Uke and Tori must maintain proper posturing in both Shizen and Jigo-tai in order to show appropriate use of the body and reflect an alert mind. The partners must always maintain eye contact or keep each other in their field of vision. Attention has to be paid to the application of proper Atemi and arm lock.
4. As for the study of the ancient kata, Koshiki-No-Kata, both partners must understand the historical context of this kata which originated in the late 1600 years from the Kito school. It must be assumed that Jigoro Kano adapted the performance to best suit the judo costume (without armour). The emphasis is to be placed on the right posture and the application of Kuzushi. Nevertheless, the demonstration must keep in mind that it represents the wearing and moving about covered by armour (38kg) and possessing the long and short weapons of the period, including the helmet. As a result, all the movements in the first set must be performed at a slow pace and the posture simulating the difficulties in maneuvering with full body armour and weapons to the sides. Attention must be paid to the movements of the eyes, head, arms, trunk and steps. In the second series, the samurai is presumed to be without his armour, and therefore, the techniques are done at a faster pace.

5. Itsutsu-No Kata or the kata summarizing the five elements or principles influencing the judo esthetic development which were abstracted from natural phenomenon. This kata has been misunderstood by many demonstrators as they frequently project the wrong visual impressions. Visual contact is important, the hand pushing must be progressive and there shall not be exaggeration with oscillating Uke’s body. When Uke recovers from his fall, he must attack with a presumed small sword or dagger and Tori must make the Tai Sabaki in order to avoid the thrust and make use of the incoming energy source.
The display of centrifugal forces must develop from a slow to a rapid displacement. In expressing the effect of the tidal wave, attention must be centered on the progressive approach and to the right level of push against the abdomen of Uke. In the demonstration of the effect of the final convergence of the two large masses, Tori must practice his timing as not to anticipate too early the approach of Uke and the latter must make his break fall over the upper torso of Tori resting down on his side.

Sensei Osawa 10th dan supervising while Enoki and Sato sensei 8th dan perform Itsutsu no Kata

Closing comments

The international Kodokan kata course has proven to be a solid activity for creating and solidifying our purpose of continuing self-improvement and to pursue our engagement towards the international Kodokan judo community.

Individually or collectively, the kata have highlighted the need to improve our abilities to focus on the moment; to develop a better awareness of our surroundings; to improve our time management; to enhance our judgement in the use of space and make the right decision when facing difficult situations. We were once again reminded of the four options before us during moments of confrontation: to detect or observe, to analyse or discuss, to judge or distract and to disarm or act diligently.

During this concentrated training session, we were able to appreciate all the overhaul performances, dissect individual techniques along the triumvirate essentials of Kuzushi, Tsukuri and Kake to better observe the natural principles at work and how the harmony and complementary of all the parts make for an effective technique.
The study of kata may well represent a potential obstacle to many judo beginners anxious to attain short term competitive results. The quest to pursue their study and comprehension is imperative as the kata analysis and performance are “the clef de voute” to better understand the mechanisms and real meanings of judo.

Let us not be discouraged by the amount of efforts needed to decompose and reconstruct individual movements or by the length of time our individual journey will necessitate to present a harmonious and logical demonstration. The beauty in kata cannot be exposed in the few hours of training needed for promotional purposes.

Along our training path, there is bound to be different opinions and interpretation by teachers and colleagues, yet, the truth or the principle of each technique will remain permanently engraved in our mind.

Let us close with the remarks of Jigoro Kano as captured on page 140 in the book “Mind over Muscle” by sensei Naoki Murata: “It is not good to pursue only what interests you. If something is beneficial, you should practice it regardless of how little it interests you. Your immediate interest cannot be used to your permanent benefit.”

Our devotion to practice kata as often as possible and our desire to experiment with each one will be our allies.

Have a good practice.

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August 2012

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