

Judo Ron 81- Judo Combat Postures and Strategies

The founder of Judo Jigoro Kano, built his Kodokan judo in 1882 on the following pedagogical approach:” ... *to include the study and practice of techniques with the purpose of using mental and physical energy most effectively in order to achieve one’s goals no matter what the endeavor.*”ⁱ

This profound mandate is somewhat hard to respect and let alone to follow considering the evolution and transformation of judo since becoming an international combat sport in the 1950’s. We have since witnessed the various beginnings and adaptations of new competitive judo styles, techniques done on the “fly” with only one hand holding on the costume and joisting to gain the superior kumi-kata or guard. We are more and more in the presence of semi-professional judoka who have built strong muscular-skeleton systems especially adapted for competitions in given weight-classes. The morphology syndrome associated with the need to win did introduced new training methods and programs.

We have to recognize, that today, the study and practice of the simple Gokyo technical corpus is no longer sufficient to access the podium. Federations are supported by financial rewards in accordance with the number of medals they obtain; to fulfill the new mandate, the judoka requires specific tactics and strategies based upon changing morphology and experience. In France alone, some 15000 high elite fighters distributed in twenty plus competition poles are mustering the majority of the financial and technical support which was previously oriented to serve its 600000 strong membership. Can the judo principles of yesteryears still be recognized and applied in today’s ‘environment?

Nowadays, the battle to control or impose the respective kumi kata (guard) is the principal preoccupation of fighters. As the French author JL Masnière illustrated in his 1974 book: “*The new way to manage your energy in combat is to first find the right opportunity, then prepare the relevant Kuzushi to accompany your swift action and go for the maki-komi or final roll with all your body mass kept as closed as possible to the opponent.*”ⁱⁱ The opponents have the same aim: to win. The methods of acquisition of such goals are not always through the most efficient use of energy. More than once we witness either combatant losing their balance in either the preparation or the conclusion of the throw for Ippon.

Can this last observation be interpreted as a variation or continuation of the original ideas expressed by Jigoro Kano when he referred to Judo Shai in the late 1880's?

At that period of development of his judo, he embedded a phrase illustrating his concept of the favorite spirit of Shiai in the followings: **"JU YOKU GO O SEISU"**. These words are roughly translated to mean that softness controls hardness and therefore presupposes that there is a visible and personal adaptation given to different situations as performed by both players.

The known survival conditions of freeze, fight or flee which we normally associate with a combat situation are manifested and manipulated by the judoka's intentions and reactions to the level of threats. As such, there could be actions inclined to be aligned with more aggressive or passive behaviors depending upon the levels of response chosen. Appropriate adjustments with the employ of energy will follow.

In Kano's concept, the combatants are trained or predisposed not to freeze in place, remain neutral, confront or resist directly an incoming powerful opponent. The proposed responses are to observe the incoming threat, assess the danger level, deflect the lunge and make use of several natural fulcrums, diversions of lines of force and other elaborate subterfuges to master or conquer the opponent with the use of the combined energies.

The suggested approach presupposes that the judoka is able to make a quick assessment of vulnerabilities, move quickly to take maximum advantage of the weaknesses and exerts the minimum of force to take over the situation. To be able to deliver a worthy and efficient performance, the judoka must possess a suitable posture giving him the vantage point and the maximum flexibility.

Observations revealed to Kano that a superior position was needed where one could control the delicate transformation of strength into the appropriate mechanisms to take swift advantage of a new scoring opportunity. As we shall see, this voluntary combat situation is best obtained and managed by putting one's mental and muscular-physical energies into a unified effort for maximal result.

Shizen-Tai

Furthering his researches into the old Ju Jutsu practices, Jigoro Kano was able to recognize the importance of the various postures or stances used by Samurai to cope with all kinds of combat situations occurring in the streets, in fields or in halls. He was able to identify that the best postures are those permitting the warrior to quickly see and appraise incoming threats be they from unarmed attacks, blows of different kinds, dissimilar weapons thrusts or disparate threatening swords movements.



He consolidated those findings into a concept or approach which he called: **Shizen-Tai**. He described such a posture as the position which best emphasized a natural state of balance and offered immediate readiness without extra tensing of the body. He noted that by keeping the arms and legs flexible enough, one was able to respond to immediate threats and quickly engage into the initiation of free movements as a form of effective response to incoming threats. He practiced this posture with successful results against his own masters and peers during several years.

In the course of performing different Randori-Shiai programs, he frequently warned the students to maintain the Shizen-tai as the key position and avoid transforming it for different reasons which would weaken it.

Some students did not follow his teaching to the letter and they had to be reprimanded by another teacher such as Sensei Sakujiro Yokohama, who wrote in his treaty of 1911ⁱⁱⁱ (translated in 1914) that: *“When engaged in contest, and out of fear of being thrown, students are apt to adopt unnatural postures such as bending their back, stretching out their arms, supporting their body with their arm and thus placing themselves into a disadvantageous position as a direct consequence.”*

It was soon determined that in such a negative or precarious posture one could not move freely and that it would be inconvenient to embark upon decisive offensive tactics or employ counter attacks successfully.

Shizen Tai, the natural stance

Early and similar accounts of what constituted **Shizen-Tai** can be summarized as follow: *You stand upright without in the least bending your head or body. The feet are slightly separated and knees straight but flexible. The eyes should be set to view twenty or thirty paces ahead. In combat situation displacement to the right and left or rearward is recommended to accommodate the threat levels.*

It may be necessary to adopt temporarily a more defensive position called Jigo-Tai by flexing the knees and extending the feet separation and by lowering the body but keeping the torso and head straight. When you hold the Jigo Tai for too long, you are not only restrained in your movements but will tire quickly. It is therefore very important that you do not make use of Jigo-Tai too often or develop the habit of restricting yourself in what movements you can accomplish.

Shizen-Tai was then and is still considered as the most appropriate natural upright posture for fighting. It is viewed as the only posture that gives the defendant the balance and maneuverability he or she needs to deal with a multitude of attacking angles and forms. We have to remember that the original judo techniques did serve several purposes: means of self-defense, methods of physical education and martial sport's competitive tools.

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As such, the posture is still valid to cope with situations outside the dojo or Shai-Jo. In street combat situations where there are no rules, an attack can come in the form of a direct fist, a slanted blow or a single leg take down, a swung bottle, a thrown rock or a knife attack. A crouching posture as we may have described above would certainly constitute a horrible posture to prepare for against most

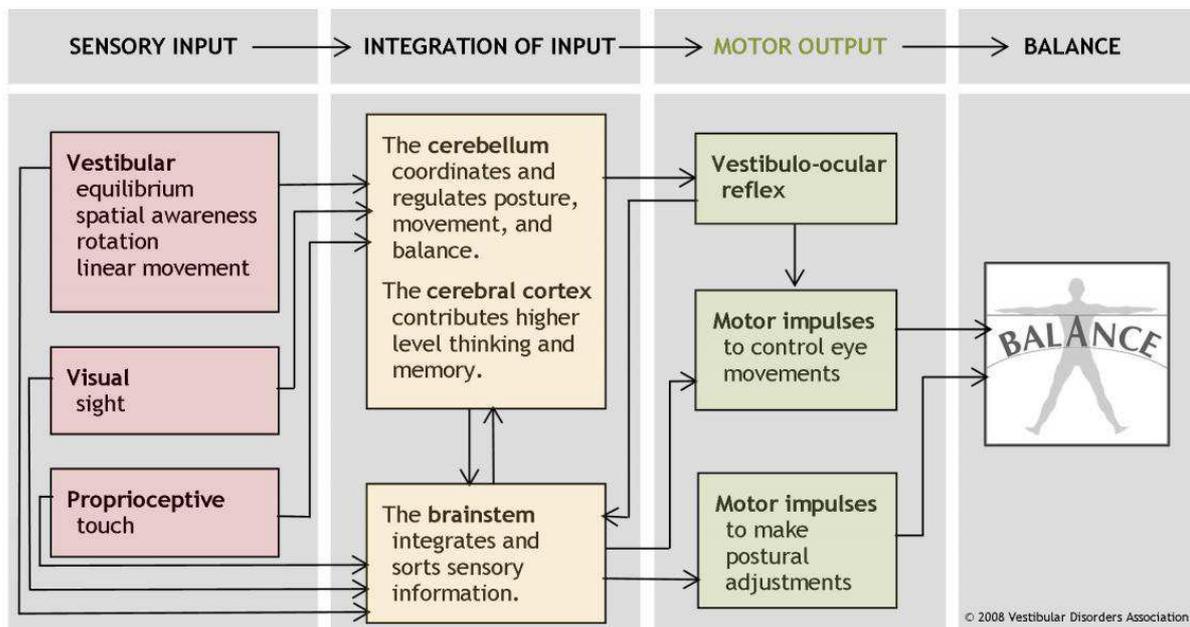


forms of attacks.

Balance is the objective

If we agree that the natural upright posture is to be considered as the best initial stance for judo activities, let us look at its most poignant characteristic, that of providing the utmost human balance system.

The next graphic illustrated in 2008 by Mary Ann Watson of the V.D.A^{iv} exposes the fascinating links between the sensorial systems, the muscular-skeletal system and the diverse functions of the brain for the attainment of true balance as provided by an upright position.



To be in balance while standing in a natural stance as described in **the Shizen-Tai** means that we have the ability to maintain our body's center of mass over its base of support. As such, it allows us to see clearly ahead, identify different orientations with respect to gravity, and determine both directions and speed of movement from us or from other objects. We are also capable of making automatic posture adjustments to maintain our stability under various conditions or through different activities.

As identified in the above illustration, our balance is normally achieved and maintained by a complex set of sensory-motors control system which is feed from signals received from our vision, touch and smell, spatial orientation receptors that are linked with our eyes, ears, muscles, joints and the like.

When we keep the head straight, we are able to capture thousands of signals from the eyes' retina who is constantly adjusting to different luminosity and send appropriate signals to adjust our relativity vis-à-vis different objects of dissimilar size, shape or form. Heads up means that we are capable of having our opponent in our line of sight.

Thinking about the relative functions of our muscles groups and joints, let us remember that our skin, muscles and joints react to different conditions such as heat, pressure, temperature etc. and permit us to adjust to changing circumstances. As leverage play an important role in judo, we must become aware of joints and muscles' optimal productive angles as well as their movement limits.

Our sensory impulses emanating from our neck region and ankles have an important role in coordinating motion detection and spatial orientation. It is also imperative that we maximize the stand erect posture if only to be able to use the correct and appropriate signals received from both our ears (canals, caves and liquid) to maximize our vertical orientation and coordinate our linear movements.

There are so many internal players or functions at work simultaneously to secure the equilibrium, luckily most are activated automatically or semi-automatically through the linkages of brains, memory and signals orientation.

It is known that we learn through different exposures, practices, experiences and through repetitions. At each step, signals are transmitted to our brain and they appear faster, become clearer and sharper with added repetitions under similar conditions.

We can then surmise that the **Shizen-Tai** posture provides the best opportunity to maintain our balance and offer the best reaction potential. This is but one part of the equation in a judo match, a second part consists of breaking away that equilibrium from the opponent with the minimum of force. We call that process: performing Kuzushi.

Kuzushi

In combat situation, Judo techniques must maximize the breaking of the natural posture and balance in order to maximize the displacement of the center of gravity and make use of the "moment of equilibrium".

In breaking the posture, there are of course some constraints, such as: the degree of freedom desired to be maintained (to what extent of time or exposure to an uncomfortable posture are you prepare to withstand), the postural strength required to keep the balance (the muscles tensions vacillating in midriff) and the extent of natural control mechanisms being exercised to ensure quick recovery towards another natural position of stability.

Kuzushi factors

Wither you are trying to place the opponent into a state of disequilibrium or retain your own balance, you will have to consider amongst many factors: your general physical abilities, your weight distribution, your limb measurements and the amount of flexibility of your joints, your sensory systems capacity, perception potential, the attraction exercised by gravitational forces depending on the surface composition and the space you truly occupy along with the speed with which you can displace yourself in a given direction for quick recuperation.

These conditions and many others factors will be involved in your reactive strategies for offense or defense or when you adjust your base of support by simply taking extended or lateral steps to shift your weight or when you make greater use of the body mass to exercise sufficient torque without changing the relative position of your feet.

As one can appraise, there are lots factors to consider, let alone understanding the level of threat and forcefulness expressed by the opponent's actions-reactions who may be well known to you or who is remaining a mystery until this very last moment.

For most judoka, these factors remain in the realm of the coaches. Unfortunately, it is not the coaches who need to fight and gain the superiority. This means that most judoka will work for grips, then utilize one of many throws that uses the strong grips to break the balance and equilibrium of the opponent.

They will push and pull with the upper torso and arms to attack the most fragile sector of the opponent at the risk of losing their own postural equilibrium and even forgetting to make the necessary voluntary adjustments to their own posture in order to maintain their own equilibrium. What are the possible outcomes? Using lots of energy to no results or follow a more fortunate ending taken by the more experienced judoka , that of resorting to the maki komi as a way to end the throw where all control and stability measures are sacrificed for the Ippon.

These conditions necessitate that we describe the Kuzushi process in order to have a better understanding of one of the key combat finding by Jigoro Kano.

Additional description for Kuzushi or posture breaking

When seeking technical description about Kuzushi, one of our first references is that of Sensei Kyuzo Mifune 10th dan, who wrote his *Canon of Judo* in 1963^v. In that document, he explained Kuzushi as : “*the capacity to induce the opponent into an instable posture which will devoid him of various actions*”.

To illustrate his point, he used different throwing/action associated with various movements and resorted to demonstrate the push and pulls actions in the form of continual curves or arcs made of complementary forces to exploit the vulnerabilities of the opponent to one’s own advantage. Like many of his predecessors and followers, he saw the essence of judo in controlling the stability of the center of physical gravity.

On the footsteps of Jigoro Kano, he illustrated eight natural directions (Happo Kuzushi) where the opponent can barely maintain his balance when pushed, pulled or lifted and where one can maximize the pendulum effect obtained by moving portions of the opponent’s mass along and over the center of gravity.

Sensei Mifune further believed and demonstrated that it was necessary to appreciate that one should move with speed to take care of the opportunity’s

time span. From his observations he listed some essential principles worth repeating:

1. *Search for the opportunity where the opponent is carrying less weight*
2. *Make rapid and constant adjustments that complements each other.*
3. *Make use of your entire body mass as a kinetic force to throw.*

Another point of view

Without going into a mechanical-physical dissertation about the various forms of Kuzushi, let surmise the explanations given by the judo researchers Jiichi Watanabe and Lindy Avakian^{vi} who prescribed that the judoka must first find and identify the best attacking or striking opportunity through observing the unguarded moments presented by the opponent, then decide the form of actions to either go directly on the weak spot or proceed to initiate various actions-reactions situations that can be taken advantage of by exploiting the reaction time and or breaking the posture of the opponent before the latter has time to recuperate his balance or composure.

When describing how to break the posture, these authors recommended that we should consider the base of support, the weight of the opponent and the location of the center of gravity. All three elements are normal components found in every stable object, regardless of the forms or shapes.

By using different laboratory measurements they established that the proper natural Shizen-tai posture presented far more mechanical advantages over all other fighting postures. They concentrated their efforts on ways and means to break it down. Using the Kano's approach of Happo Kuzushi they were able to produce sufficient alterations to the natural posture to force the opponent into making necessary physical adjustments to recuperate initial or dynamic stability.

Profiting from those lapses of time for procuring recuperative actions, they asserted that the concentrated muscular ensembles residing in the abdomen and the subsequent displacement of the center of mass played a most important role in coordinating all other segments of muscle groups needed to embark in a postural destabilization process. They thus recommended that the action of performing Kuzushi be initiated from the waist area first and not the upper arm/torso regions as frequently beleived.

Common Strategies

Combat strategies are numerous. Field commanders and extraordinary fighters begin their battle away from the battle grounds and with months of researches and information collecting... They get to know the “enemy or rival” and make in-depth appreciations of both their own forces and weaknesses as well as assess the best conditions under which they intend to use their assets’. It was common to send patrols to conduct reconnaissance and probe the enemy power or readiness before committing their whole armies.

Today, how many judoka and elite fighters are that well prepared? Observing recent competitions at the national and international levels, one is lead to believe that over 70% are seriously deficient in intelligence gathering and do not possess sufficient tactical skills to master the given situations. You do not go into the lion’s den without due preparation.

The judo matches demand similar considerations. Outside of the dojo, very few judoka possesses a good image of the opponent. There is lots of dependence upon the coach’s assessment and the odd lectures of a few fighting videos involving major fighters.

Are the training regimes or programs well understood and just how much flexibility or liberty is given to the fighter to conduct his or her own game plan? Based upon what criteria and state of readiness do the judoka embark on the match? These elements require serious attention if we are to improve the ways and means to fight for the benefit of improving self or at the other end, to winn against a selected opponent.

As we get near the fighting time, we may consider using more basic psychology tools to get a better appreciation of what the encounter will look like. For those judoka not benefiting from an entourage of experts, there are other simple tools that can be used in extremis in order not to lose every advantages.

Variation of strategic tools

You just cannot go forward and push your luck at what you do not understand to constitute a threat. Social recognition or bio-feedback is one of those mechanisms we previously covered. (Judo-Ron 16, 20, 41, 49, 57, 58 and 72)^{vii}

In summary, it is by observation and feelings that one can acquire sufficient messages to properly develop a responsive action plan. Take for example the ways the judoka approach the opponent: specific moves and gestures will tell a lot about character and disposition: if one is afraid of the other he or she will keep the arms straight repulsing the opponent away. If seeking immediate dominance at the first touch the arms will be bent to facilitate a rapprochement and a control over the neck; when unsure, the judoka will avoid direct contact and feint a touch and go to secure sufficient time or space to observe. There are a few studies in the domain of psychology^{viii} that transmit the hypotheses that cognition is indeed linked with our perceptions, thoughts, feelings and that we continue to learn from all our senses and interactions with the outside world.

A recent study reported in a Psychological Science magazine mentioned that the research by Koch, Holland, Hengstler & Knippenberg suggest that physically stepping backwards may be associated with gains in the ability to deal with problematic situations. The article written about body locomotion suggests that physically taking a step back from a difficult situation may trigger higher-order cognitive control functions. Such functions help us direct our behaviors and influence attentional processes to more effectively deal with a given situation. The first three seconds of a match may well lay out its outcomes. By stepping back, judoka may be able to refocus on the problem at hand e.g., dealing with the unknown threat caused by the opponent's presence in the vicinity.

Before insisting upon following or imposing a constant approach immediately after the shout/call of “HAJIME”, coaches and judoka should endeavor to review all the possibilities before them with an understanding of their advantages and disadvantages. Arms flexed for pushing or placed in extension to create space, hold the opponent away or create a situation of avoidance may contain more significance than simply being positive or negative.

The initial avoidance may well reflect: a lack of understanding, an aversion towards the opponent or the need to take the extra space to properly assess and think about a solution. We have to remember that each combat situation has its own characteristics and all need constant analysis if we want to improve.

Conclusion

In judo combat situation, we have to remember the principles at play. There are various ways that the principles of gentleness and mutual benefits can be applied against the opposing force being used upon us.

Judoka should not be asked to master all strategies but are required to do their personal best at all times. There are various kinds of techniques that if improperly used can be harmful to the opponent and in the long run, detrimental to the sport of judo in general.

The IJF is continuously attempting to ensure that the current rules of engagements reflect those principles of intelligent use of energy and mutual benefits. It is our responsibility to adjust to the time as best we can.

It is understood that the appropriate use of Shizen Tai and proper Kuzushi will facilitate the rendering of flexible responses and initiatives. The manners by which we adopt the right posture, take advantage of the right opportunity and follow up with quick movements are indeed respectful of the principle of gentleness as communicated by Jigoro Kano.

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To make further progress in improving judo competition skills, we must seek to make use of the various fruits of our inquiries, intuitions, speculations and the inputs provided by the scientific milieu.

I am hoping that this article has contributed to a better understanding of the Judo World.

Have a good practical session.

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