

The Gentle Way

A modern martial art for a modern world.

In the late 19th century, Japan was going through a period of seismic cultural change from feudal society to modern nation. Practice of traditional martial arts like jujitsu was on the wane as society looked to the West for inspiration. However, in 1882 a school and a dojo (a place to practice martial arts) known as the Kodokan was founded in Tokyo by Jigoro Kano and a new form of martial art was born: one primed to take on the world.

The word judo shares its root with jujitsu—the first character of both terms being the Chinese character *-ju* (柔), meaning gentle or flexible. However, the *-jitsu* (術) suffix (meaning technique) in jujitsu is replaced with *-do* (道), meaning “way,” in judo. This “gentle way” was conceived as more than just a form of physical combat as practiced in jujitsu, where the aim was simply to subjugate the opponent—judo was, and is, a set of principles according to



The Kodokan welcomes students and practitioners of all levels, from absolute beginners to Olympic gold medalists.



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which the practitioners can lead their lives.

The central principle of judo is that of *seiryoku zenyo* (maximum efficient use of energy). Originally a jujitsu concept, it became the philosophical backbone of judo along with *jita kyoei* (mutual welfare and benefit). These principles are observed through training in attack and defense techniques. Being able to adjust to and evade opponents' attacks is also key to unbalancing them, and leaving them open to defeat: this is the concept of *ju yoku go o seisu* (softness controls hardness). As the body becomes stronger from regular training, so does the mind. With a strong mind and body, the practitioner's life outside the dojo can be enhanced in a myriad of ways, and as a result, society at large can benefit.

Judo made its Olympic debut at the 1964 Games in Tokyo. It had gone from being the brainchild of one man to being part of the international cultural and sporting lexicon in less than a century. The subsequent years have seen judo cross-pollinate with other disciplines, with different forms developing and branching off. Even in Kodokan judo—the original and most popular style—this expansion has been accompanied by what some commentators see as lapses in the quality of combat. Some contestants seem to focus solely on winning contests while overlooking the moral and philosophical underpinnings of the “sport.” It could be said that



Dojo members range in age from under six to over 80.

the practice of competitive judo internationally has veered away from the founding principles of *seiryoku zenyo* and *jita kyoei*. A challenge going forward is, therefore, to refocus on and reemphasize judo's central tenets of respect, friendship, gratitude, and morality in large-scale competitions.

High-stakes tournaments aside, judo is practiced and enjoyed by people all over the world in the 21st century, irrespective of age, build, gender, or religion. The reasons for judo's popularity could be in its inherently positive philosophy, and in the applicability of that philosophy to modern life. In beginning and ending with a bow, respect between opponents is given and received. In using energy



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efficiently, potential is maximized. There is an egalitarian allure in the ability of a person of smaller stature to overcome a person larger and stronger. The fundamentals of judo instill a very positive philosophy, and in this sense, are perhaps more needed than ever in today's modern society.

The next time you watch a judo contest on TV, look past the throws, locks, and chokes. Judo is much, much more than just a sport, and the benefits of practice can be reaped by anyone. Why not seek out a dojo near where you live, and experience the gentle way for yourself?