

Kano and Kata: Reply to Geof Gleeson

by

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ABSTRACT

In a lecture delivered at the opening of the National Technical Conference of the British Judo Association, G. R. Gleeson discusses, as somewhat separate issues, the early Kano and conditions surrounding his success, and kata's role in Judo. He argues that Kano's success in the early years was more a result of fortunate sponsorship, politics, and timing, and less a result of Kano's particular efforts or talents. Separately he argues that kata has become unnecessarily fixed, and hence relatively useless, but that randori is not the most efficient means for preparation for shiai. I will argue that Gleeson's characterizations of Kano are misleading conjecture. I also argue that Gleeson's characterizations of kata represent an overly limited perspective, and have little to do with Kano's conceptions of the role of kata in the syllabus.

(The author wishes to express his gratitude to Mr. Gerald Lafon, who provided a copy of Mr. Gleeson's paper and suggested critically examining Mr. Gleeson's remarks.)

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In a paper delivered before the National Technical Conference of the British Judo Association in 1987, Geof Gleeson discusses what he calls “the two K’s—Kano and Kata.” Gleeson argues that Judo training has lost its way, that coaches are not being adequately prepared, and that these coaches no longer are sure what they are supposed to be doing. He suggests part of the remedy by allusion—he argues that our Judo experience is greatly enriched if we examine people, ideas, and methods more closely. He also argues that coach training programs in his country, established to address recognized shortcomings, are not really sport-specific, and that much needs to be done to translate such programs for use by Judo coaches so that the problems are directly addressed. So far, so good. It is hard to argue with such conclusions.

The problem is not with Gleeson’s conclusions as stated, it is with his arguments. In typical Gleesonian style, he takes a roundabout, colorful, and thought-provoking, albeit sketchy, route in making his arguments. Unfortunately, in doing so he makes some rather egregious errors. So, in essence, I wish to take issue with Gleeson’s arguments and intermediate conclusions, and not with his ultimate thesis.

Gleeson portrays Judo’s founder, Jigoro Kano, as mostly a beneficiary of circumstance and politics, and the careful guidance of his parents. We are given a picture of a fortunate Kano who happens to get good advice and be at the right place at the right time. Gleeson’s Kano is a part-time Jujutsu hobbyist whose real interest is philosophy, and whose Judo thinking, at least in the early years, is rather haphazard and casual. Kano’s considerable personal talents are nowhere mentioned, and ample evidence that runs contrary to Gleeson’s portrayal is not investigated. So while, for the most part, Gleeson seems to avoid making direct misstatements, shadings are given, and unsupported conjectures are openly made.

Next Gleeson takes on the kata-versus-shiai debate. While he proceeds in an interesting way, it is difficult to discern the argument he is making. While many of the pieces seem to be presented in an accurate enough way, somehow the whole is elusive.

In the paper that follows, I will attempt to clarify and realign some of Gleeson’s statements regarding the early Kano and his social context. Also, I will use Gleeson’s discussion of the kata-versus-shiai debate as the starting point for an alternative view of the objectives of Judo training, and the roles of the various training methods in pursuing those objectives.

Did Kano succeed despite himself?

Gleeson argues that Jigoro Kano’s early successes were largely due to his being in the right place at the right time, and due to some judicious choices regarding school and career. If his arguments were a little less extreme and a little more considerate of Kano’s ample talents, one might be disinclined to debate them. After all, we are all shaped to some extent by the times in which we live, the events that surround us, and the opportunities that arise for us. Certainly Kano was no different in this. So where is the problem?

Gleeson appears to discount Kano’s contributions and attribute the Kodokan’s success more to some sort of government sponsorship in a tale comes off rather like an Oliver Stone conspiracy theory. It makes for fun reading, and is educational and illuminating along the way, but it still comes off as biased and misleading at points. He also misrepresents, I think, the contributions and interests of the founder and his father.

Gleeson sets the stage for Kano’s entry onto the scene with a hasty overview of the Tokugawa Era. The view we are given of the samurai class during the Tokugawa is guided by reference to Ogyu Sorai, one of the samurai’s greatest critics.¹ Going to a critic for information is not necessarily a bad thing, but one should be careful when considering the information one receives there. While Sorai is was of the three seminal thinkers of the period, he is most noted for his establishment of the study of language in Japan. He also attracted a good deal of attention because of the pivotal role he played in the development of Japanese Confucian thought. This is all to say that Sorai was also very biased toward believing that neo-Confucian thought was a product of his own period (at his own hands).² Guided by Sorai’s truth, Gleeson deftly gives us the impression that the Tokugawa installed neo-Confucianism over Zen in order to better control the samurai. Even as an over-simplification, this is no small stretch.

First, as noted in passing by Gleeson, Shao Yung and others introduced neo-Confucianism into Japan in the 11th Century, 500 years or so *before* the Tokugawa.³ This was following a less successful introduction of Confucianism in its older form several centuries before. *If* neo-Confucianism met with increased success under Tokugawa, it is more likely that it was because the nation was unified under a highly hierarchical government that more closely followed the Confucian model. Efforts by the Tokugawa to embrace neo-Confucianism, while they took place, were probably more secondary in importance to these other factors.

Also, neo-Confucianism, intertwined with the Buddhism of several sects, native Shinto, and Taoism, was being continually reshaped into the informal *bushido* of the warrior class for several centuries, only coming into focus more sharply in the context of Tokugawa. Prior to Tokugawa, when samurai were being called upon to become active on the

¹ J. R. McEwan, *The Political Writings of Ogyu Sorai*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

² “Ogyu Sorai” in *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World*, Ian P. McGreal, ed., Harper Collins, 1995, pp. 371-374.

³ The resurgence in interest in Confucianism by the Japanese followed a similar neo-Confucian movement in China.

battlefield before age 20, there was little time for considerations of a more complete, lifelong training regimen. The relative peace of the Tokugawa *also* allowed samurai to take on the more mundane roles of tax collector, administrator, and so on, that Gleeson mentions somewhat pejoratively. It was this freedom from the demands of the battlefield that gave the samurai “time” to think about more philosophical matters. It also *demand*ed that they find a way to maintain their fighting skills, and not forget the lessons of the past, during a period of prolonged peace.

So, not surprisingly, it is during Tokugawa that the major *ryuha* are formalized, kata are constructed, and philosophies are examined. These things happened not because of oppression by the Tokugawa, but rather as a result of the freedom and challenges of peace time. It is not the samurai who are oppressed by the Tokugawa, as Gleeson would have it, but rather those at the lowest levels of the social order—notice I do not refer to them as “rungs on the social ladder” since there are none. Social “climbing” was impossible under Tokugawa. Under normal conditions, if you were near the top of the social strata, like the samurai, your position was pretty much secure; if you were near the bottom, you were not likely to advance.⁴

In passing, Gleeson introduces Shao’s cosmological structure, making a point of the dichotomy of the static universe into *ju* (soft) and *go* (hard) elements. Historically, from the martial arts perspective, this turned out to be less important than the holistic mind-body relationship emphasized by Shao’s successor Wang Yang Ming, especially his notion of *ju* as making the body “soft” or “pliant” to the will.⁵ This concept was one of the many faces of *ju* perceived and embraced by Kano. Gleeson makes this allusion, but never offers these details, and to the extent that it *does* succeed, it misleads. Having introduced the subject, Gleeson fails to offer more critical, more relevant information from Kano’s own martial arts lineage. So the reader is left with a shaded, incomplete picture.

Kano extensively studied the *Tenjin Shinyo Ryu Jujutsu* which is a fusion of *Shin no Shindo Ryu* and *Yoshin Ryu*. Yoshin Ryu (Yo, meaning “willow tree,” and Shin, meaning “heart or spirit”) was devised by a doctor from Nagasaki named Shirobei Yoshitoki Akiyama. Akiyama had studied battlefield and healing arts in Japan, and is thought to have been accomplished in *Jujutsu*. Wishing to extend his knowledge, Akiyama went to China to study in the 1600s. There he studied medicine, *katsu* (life-restoring techniques), and various martial arts, especially striking arts and their use as applied to vital areas (*kyusho-jutsu*). He also studied Taoism, Taoist healing and martial arts, and acupuncture. The centerpiece of the art he created by incorporating his training in China with Japanese methods was a syllabus of 300 techniques. This represented an infusion of the “soft” or “internal” martial arts of China into Japan.⁶

The soft or internal arts were known popularly in China as *jou-chuan*, the characters for which are read in Japanese as “ju-ken,” meaning “soft fist.” It was common throughout that period to refer to all internal arts by this name. This may have played some role in the eventual popularity of the term *jujutsu* for these rough-and-tumble martial arts. Kano and others argued that there was nothing “gentle” or “soft” about Jujutsu, and that *ju* was hardly the over-riding principle of the arts. The arts were called “ju-arts” or *jujutsu* because they were based on internal methods and *ki* (internal energy), not because they employed no strength or force.⁷

Gleeson has all this culminate in Kano’s arrival on the scene eight years before the Tokugawa falls. We are given a picture of the Japanese as a people motivated by an apparent similarity between the neo-Confucianism they had embraced and the ideology of the West.

Once again this misleads. The more common view of this is quite different. According to this view, Japan opened as a result of the arrival of the “Black Ships” of Admiral Perry in 1853. This made the Japanese become aware that the old system could not defend them, and that they had fallen far behind the rest of the world in many ways as a result of their policy of *sakoku* or “seclusion from the outside world.” Perry’s visit and other similar events made the Japanese people realize that their defenses were outdated, and that they needed an exchange of ideas with the rest of the world. There came a call for “national reconstruction” in an effort to enter the modern age, and there was an increasing lack of confidence in the Shogunate. Ultimately, the ruling shogun, Keiki, resigned and the Emperor Meiji took over the reigns of government in 1867.

Edo, which had been the *bakufu*, or military headquarters of the shogunate, became the capitol city with the name changed to *Tokyo* or “Eastern Capitol.” The *daimyo* became prefectures (provinces), and the samurai were banned from wearing their swords. Emasculated by this move, the samurai undertook a series of failed attempts at military coups, the most famous of these being the *Saigo Uprising*. So the samurai perceived themselves as emasculated by the Meiji, not by the Tokugawa, as Gleeson asserts.

The enormous nationalistic fervor that arose with the new Meiji government, who advanced the country under the slogan *fukoku kyohei* or “rich country, strong military,” makes it clear that the focus was on national defense. Meiji undertook an accelerated plan to become a world power. By 1894, the militarism had yielded fruit, and Japan was pursuing military expansion in China (the Sino-Japanese War). The Meiji encouraged nationalism, right-wing extremism, conservatism, and even militarism as a means of balancing its *fear* of the liberal Western ideas. The Meiji never lost sight of the fact

⁴ Irwin Scheiner, “Benevolent Lords and Honorable Peasants: Rebellion and Peasant Consciousness in Tokugawa Japan,” in Tetsuo Najita and Irwin Scheiner, eds., *Japanese Thought in the Tokugawa Period 1600-1868: Methods and Metaphors*, pp. 39-62. Milton W. Meyer, *Japan: A Concise History, Third Edition*, Rowman & Littlefield, 1993, pp. 97-132. W. Scott Morton, *Japan: Its History and Culture, Third Edition*, McGraw-Hill, 1994, pp. 123-148.

⁵ E. G. Henke, *The Philosophy of Wang Yang Ming*, Paragon, 1964.

⁶ This is discussed in more detail in the present author’s forthcoming book entitled *Kano’s Judo*, published by Guardian Bay Publications.

⁷ The Chinese were inclined to refer to varieties of martial art as *chuan*, whereas the Japanese referred to them as *jutsu*.

that one of the principal reasons for the pressure for the resignation of the Tokugawa shogun was a fear that its military was too weak to protect Japan adequately from outside attack.

It is true that once the Tokugawa had fallen, for the reasons given, and the Meiji Restoration began, that people were naturally curious, even hungry, for information about the West. It was a natural fascination born of centuries of seclusion, and it was encouraged by the Meiji.⁸

Kano arrives on the scene, a precocious child-genius, hungry for knowledge, determined to understand this new world. He also came on the scene early enough to see, as a child, the crumbling Tokugawa, samurai emasculated and reduced to alcoholism, crime, and performing tricks on street corners for money. Thus Kano determines to stand in *two worlds at once*. He embraces the new Western knowledge, yet determines to preserve the old. His educational programs confirm this.

It may not have been Kano's parents, as Gleeson suggests, who directed his education and career choices so deftly. Kano's mother died when Kano was about nine years old, and his father was busy with earning a living. Moreover, Kano's exhibited an early propensity to go against the wishes of his father. While his father thought it was important for his son to build himself up physically, he counseled young Jigoro against the study of jujutsu. He thought that jujutsu was a thing of the past, that it was dangerous, and might put him in the company of disreputable people. Luckily for us, Kano decided against taking his father's advice.

On the advice of his calligraphy instructor, Keido Ubukata, he undertakes the Western studies as well as the traditional Japanese studies, which included the Chinese classics. He later describes one function of his Judo as a means to preserve the ancient martial arts that have fallen into disrepute and disuse—all parts of a consistent picture of Kano.

Gleeson accurately indicates that Kano *won* a place in the newly established Tokyo University in 1878. This was *not* an accident or a politically motivated acceptance. If the government looked to this school as a primary source of new blood, it was because it was the *only* university in Japan at the time. Kinworth refers to the government's interest in Tokyo University graduates as "legal discrimination," and points out that graduates who entered government service were likely to make several times as much money as low-ranked civil servants and laborers.⁹ Kinworth's indignation notwithstanding, this is hardly news, nor is it particularly interesting. In the U.S., graduates from the top 10 schools, like Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and MIT, are more likely to find higher positions in government service (and elsewhere) than their counterparts without degrees. What is the point of this?

Gleeson seems to be trying to portray Kano as one of the chosen few, who got onto the fast track in part by knowing the right people. He has Kano living on "Easy Street" and his interests being supported by government favor. This discounts Kano's own achievements by implication. He ignores the fact that Kano was an extraordinary person in terms of his intellect and determination. In short, he does a great disservice to Kano and his Judo. Gleeson insinuates that Kano received government funds to buy his dojo. He conveniently forgets the years in which Kano operated out of a small room in the back of a temple (Eisho-Ji), and later out of the back of his own house—the Kodokan was literally a "garage" operation. He conveniently forgets all the nights that Kano sat up *after* teaching Judo, translating from Japanese to English and vice-versa in order to raise money to keep the dojo operational. In reality, Kano was *not* on "Easy Street," but was a person driven by his love for martial arts, who was applying all of his considerable talents and skills toward pursuing his dream.

Gleeson further insinuates that the famous 1886 tournament was set up by the government to position Kano to do its bidding among martial artists and allow him to take the central role in the development of sports. This attributes entirely too much to the fledgling Meiji government, I think. This implies that someone in Meiji, other than Kano, picked Kano, while he was still in college, to develop modern *budo* as a reconstruction of the *koryu* as a sport. Let's remember that *budo* began with Kano! Furthermore, there is no evidence that Kano *ever* saw Jujutsu as a Western-style sport. As Judo was being considered for the Olympics, Kano reportedly told Koizumi that "...they won't get it. Judo is not a sport like gymnastics...."

Gleeson hints that Kano's continued successes, his position at the Gakushuin, his 1888 appointment as its Vice Principal, his government position, and his appointment as Principal of the Shihan Gakko, were all politically motivated.

It is at about this point that perhaps Gleeson is letting the cat out of the bag. At last we see one motivation for Gleeson to minimize Kano—*perhaps he wants to diminish any evidence of Kano's genius so he can argue that some of Kano's original Judo concepts are flawed*. It is difficult to tell what Gleeson intends here. Gleeson would also like us to believe that Kano's philosophy, which Gleeson sees as Kano's strength, is a restatement of British utilitarianism, and Kano's Judo is simply a vehicle for indoctrinating the Japanese youth to these principles. *Yikes!*

As I have argued elsewhere¹⁰, the overriding principles given by Kano, *Sei Ryoku Zen Yo* and *Jita Kyoei*, are rooted deeply in Japanese thought, and do not need Western concepts to make sense. Moreover, Western interpretations may be misleading, and make it difficult to connect the physical art with the moral culture of Judo. This is not to say that some of Kano's thinking with regard to these was not influenced by his Western studies.

⁸ Milton W. Meyer, *Japan: A Concise History, Third Edition*, Rowman & Littlefield, 1993, pp. 119-148. W. Scott Morton, *Japan: Its History and Culture, Third Edition*, McGraw-Hill, 1994, pp. 149-190. W. G. Beasley, *The Rise of Modern Japan*, St. Martin's Press, 1995.

⁹ Earl K. H. Kinworth, *The Self Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought, from Samurai to Salary Man*, University of California Press, 1981.

¹⁰ *Kano's Judo*, forthcoming. Also "Judo: Morality and the Physical Art," paper presented at the U.S. National Coaches Conference National Research Symposium, September 23, 1998, in Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA.

Gleeson, Kano, and Kata

Gleeson is highly critical of kata as it is now practiced. His argument against its practice seems to reduce to the following. Kata is designed to teach techniques. There is no such thing as technique, because there is no “right way” to do anything. Kata can provide “a wide range of forms, of reference models to make spontaneous comparisons with.” He reminisces that when he learned kata at the Kodokan, the seniors there all performed and taught the kata differently, and infers that standardization is folly.

Sadly, Gleeson seems to poke all around the real issue without clearly discerning it. He also seems to have distorted the lesson of kata in his attempts to understand it in Western terms. This is a recurring theme with Gleeson. He seems intent on reducing everything to Western terms, resolving things in terms of the closest Western model he can find. This is not always possible.

For example, Gleeson writes “Kata has a long history. The first great advocate was Plato.” Apparently unaware that the concepts of Plato’s forms and Japanese kata bear little resemblance, Gleeson pursues this linkage to have us believe that Alexander’s conquests delivered the concept of kata to the Japanese via some highly circuitous route. Oliver Stone needs to hear about this one! Alexander never made it to Japan, and his career was marked by rapid conquest, but short-to-nonexistent occupations. Cultural indoctrinations of the kind alluded to by Gleeson are thought by most historians to require extensive occupations. Unhindered by such considerations and based on this tenuous thread, Gleeson attempts to imbue Japanese kata with Western attributes, and then wonders at the confusing result. I am reasonably sure that the Japanese knew nothing of Plato when they began using kata in their learning programs.

Contrary to Gleeson’s arguments to the contrary, Kano also did not require John Stuart Mill to convince him that the inductive approach to learning was the best method to acquire useful knowledge and skill—this has always been the method in the *koryu*, including those that Kano studied. It is true that Kano was a fan of Mill, a free thinking libertarian whose ideas Kano found attractive. When discussing *Itsutsu no Kata*, Kano often lectured on the relationships between Chapter 8 of Book III of Mill’s *A System of Logic* and Jujutsu. Kano related the five techniques of that kata to the five canons of Mill as well as to the five principles held by very old *ryu* like Takeuchi Ryu. It seems hardly surprising that similar ideas might arise in different parts of the world, sometimes at different times, always shaped by the cultural and social context of those involved.

In my opinion, Gleeson comes surprisingly close to the light when he argues “Kata is a sequence of ‘symbols’ available for comparisons, not accurate prescriptive shapes that are supposed to be copied photographically, but generalized symbols for quick reference when there is a need of a bit of spontaneous creativity.”

Kano makes it clear that his art is an art based upon *principles*. He makes it clear that what he teaches are principles, with the *Gokyo no Waza* as centerpiece. Principles make techniques and methods powerful and useful. It is these principles that are the “symbols” that Gleeson describes. Principles are not techniques. Techniques are specific movements or responses that may be classified according to principles, or alternatively may be embodiments or attempted executions of principles. So in Judo the techniques may vary as long as the principles are adhered to. Even more important, if kata were only about teaching individual techniques or principles, they would be redundant at best. It is the *Gokyo* that was established as the means to learn throwing principles via model techniques. For example, kata like *Nage no Kata* place the throwing principles into a richer context, and allow us to examine such elements as *ma-ai*, *ri-ai*, *irimi*, *ikioi* and *hazumi*, and so much more. Such kata give us a view of higher principles, principles beyond those that govern simple, individual techniques.

This is why the seniors at the Kodokan were all able to perform and teach the kata in different ways. They could see that the principles underlying their performances were all the same. By giving the student a variety of views of these principles, they probably hoped that the student would come to the realization that it was not the explicit expression of these principles that mattered, but rather that the governing principles were understood and applied.

Gleeson seems to have gotten this lesson in some part, and argues that later attempts to standardize the kata have destroyed what is in his opinion, kata’s limited usefulness. Gleeson goes on to suggest that there is a need for a *shiai no kata* that will encourage the student to apply each principle of throwing in many ways. Yet he writes that “... nage-no-kata ... shows how various *principles* of throwing can produce various types of throwing” (emphasis mine). Does he understand his own words? He also offers that *Koshiki no Kata* “illustrates the concept that one principle of throwing can be implemented in many ways.” So what *is* the role of this new kata that he proposes? This discussion proves very confusing.

Gleeson’s Conclusions and Mine

In his paper, in 1987, Gleeson seems to be groping for a solution to a problem most of us believe exists. How does one transmit high levels of skill to a new generation of Judoka in the most efficient manner? He argues that more randori is not the answer. Randori trains one for “long-term contests of attrition, where skill is in little demand, with only the ability to stop the opponent winning.” He argues that something else is necessary if we intend to train our students for

“sharp bursts of sophisticated skills, that can win in the short contest time available to the competitor.” What is that something else? Gleeson argues that nothing is organized to that end.

He seems to argue that some form of kata might fill the need, but not kata as previously taught and practiced. He argues that kata is structured training, and therefore is a more efficient use of time and energy than randori, which is inherently unstructured. Unstructured seems to imply that learning is accidental.

As I said at the outset, it is hard to argue with Gleeson’s basic conclusions, that more randori is not the answer, and that other methods need to be employed. As I hope I have shown, however, Judo seems to provide most of these other training methods. Kata and the technical syllabus (especially the Gokyo no Waza) are already in place to do the job. The problem seems to be that so few people fully utilize all of the elements of the syllabus, probably because they were not provided with a sufficiently wide and deep background in their own Judo training. Once this shortcoming is rectified, if additional methods need to be developed and adopted, then by all means they should be.

Kano’s actions and innovations in everything he did were anything *but* haphazard. He constructed his Judo with considerations like Gleeson’s in mind.