

The Judo Curriculum Explained

Judo was created by a team led by Dr. Jigoro Kano in 1882 in Tokyo, Japan. It was at first designed as a way to preserve traditional Jiu-jitsu (a samurai hand- to-hand combat art with many different methodologies and schools all over Japan) as a healthy and useful art into the modern age by reducing thousands of movements and katas from the various and diverse schools of Jiu-jitsu down to a much smaller syllabus. Thus, by expanding the free-fighting aspect of Jiu-jitsu, judo could then compete in popularity and utility with modern sports coming from overseas like volleyball or wrestling. Judo did become very popular and ended up an incomparably bigger martial art than had been at first imagined. It spread rapidly all over the world, with some foreign students coming to live in Japan specifically to learn Judo. It became an Olympic sport even, and remains a very popular activity to this day, likely to remain so for a long time.

The key skill in Judo is to take an attacker who is kicking, punching, or otherwise harassing you, to the ground with a hard throwing technique, thus taking away the immediate threat he is posing you. Kano writes, "it is essential to train the body to move freely and agilely **to deal with punching and kicking attacks** and to nurture the ability to react quickly and skilfully." Training to enable you to do this under the pressure of a real fight is accomplished through practicing throwing techniques with a partner and also through free fighting with a partner using throws. While being able to handle a kicking or punching adversary is a big part of the theory of Judo, since it is unsafe to train with kicks and punches in free fighting, the focus is on keeping an upright posture and quickly and deftly throwing your opponent to the ground at the earliest opportunity. Kicks, punches, and defenses were intended to be practiced in pre-arranged sequences. They are still to some degree incorporated into Judo training, but have mostly fallen by the wayside in favour of enjoying the sportive aspect of free fighting judo called "randori". Thus you can see that Judo has evolved over time, a response to popular demand. To defend against being thrown, you learn how to fall properly. This technique is called "ukemi" or "breakfalling". After throwing someone you are required to keep a grip on your opponent and stay standing, glowering down at them showing utter dominance. Since you still have your grip on him, you have the choice of either disengaging from him, kicking or punching him, or grappling on the ground in order to win the match with a ground hold, an arm lock, or a choke. While throwing someone to the ground may not incapacitate him, it does take away his immediate ability to harm you. This is why the throwing techniques are central to judo, since the most important thing is to stay alive!

Out of the many hundreds of throwing techniques available to Kano and his team from their Jiu-jitsu careers, they chose only 40 and arranged them into 5 sets of 8 throws each, to be learned one set at a time. This is in parallel to how kanji (Chinese characters) were taught in Japan -- in sets of a certain number at a time, working up to the basic 1800 characters of Chinese eventually. These sets of characters are called "kyu" grades. Students studying kanji are ranked according to their mastery of the kyu grade sets. This parallels Judo's organization of throws and grades into kyu grade sets perfectly. Kano writes, "Learning the throws in order is the key to mastery". Please take this statement very seriously! The throws are organized with two guiding principles in the minds of the creators of judo: (1) that they go roughly from easier to learn to harder to learn, and (2) that they go from the most commonly useful, to useful in more particular, less common situations. To demonstrate the wisdom of

their arrangement, to this day the most commonly scoring throws in competition are in the first two sets! If you had to only learn one set of throws, it would without question be the first set. Kano also writes, right after the last quotation above, "Once the main point of a technique has been thoroughly grasped, the acquired capability can be applied to variations." Thus, the most useful throws are taught first and you learn variations of them in the higher levels and through your own and others' experimentations and sharing of experiences. The throws of the higher sets are still among the most useful throws in the estimation of Kano's team, but are less important than the throws learned in the first few sets.

This arrangement of 40 selected throws is called the "Gokyo", meaning the "five grades". You might wonder why there are as many as 40 throws in the Gokyo. This is still a large number of throws. The reason is that wrestling on your feet with someone, both of you wearing jackets, is very complicated. Every throw is for a particular situation and for a particular angle of movement. The application of the throws really does not have much to do with how the person is standing, but rather how they are moving and how you can off-balance them. For example, "o soto gari" is used when they can be off-balanced to the back left corner (via various types of trickery). Different throws are used when the person is moving, standing still, feet close together, feet apart; it doesn't matter. What matters is the off-balancing that can be achieved. Learning how to execute throws from both right and left sides is important. You will develop a preference for some right-handed and others left-handed, depending on the strategies and habits that you evolve for yourself over your training career. A student will never discover which he will choose to use unless he actually practices both sides. He can discard whichever side doesn't work for him, but should at least try. (Note: all references to "he" and "him" can be changed to "she" and "her"; judo is gender-neutral.)

The official number of throws in the Gokyo now, however, is actually 67 -- the 40 throws of the Gokyo having been supplemented by an additional set of 8 throws about 30 or so years ago. The Shinmeisho No Waza is also included for more recent, but recognized, additional throws. The original 40 are a good starting point, though, and will serve all the way up to 2nd degree black belt. While there are 67 officially recognized throws, those are only the "baseline" -- there are hundreds (potentially endless) variations based on the 67. Learn the base throws, learn variations that suit you, your body type, physical abilities (strength, agility, flexibility, injuries/limitations), etc. (This parallels the myriad number of Chinese characters. First you learn the basic 1800 characters formally and then through your own study, you eventually learn many times that number in actual life experience.)

All the above leads into why there are so many throws and variations: Some techniques are more suited for a very strong person; some easier to do for a short, stocky person; some easier for a tall, lanky person; and, different techniques are more effective on various body types. Learn all the throws well; learn them from right and left. You will find you only keep a handful that work really well for you as your go-to moves and another handful that are for specialized circumstances. Further, because Judo is free-flowing and non-scripted, the angles are always changing. What works from one position won't work for a slightly different position without changing the technique slightly, varying it.

As you progress through the levels of throws in the Gokyo (and beyond) you start to learn how to respond to the attacks of another Judo-trained individual and more movements are responses and counters to throws you learned earlier on in your Judo career. Also as you progress through the sets of throws, you start to learn sacrifice throws, where you fall to the ground first, flinging your adversary

over your head after you in a big rolling movement. These are very powerful but also very risky: If the throws fail, you end up in a dangerous situation below your assailant on the ground. They are also in many ways harder to execute than the throws where you stay standing; however, they are a very important part of Judo and are very helpful when dealing with a much larger opponent, but only if you are very skilled in their use. The very last throw of the last set of throws in the Gokyo is a repeat of the very first throw you learned (de ashi harai) with a nasty little twist to it -- that tricky throw that you learned and struggled with all along finally has its secrets revealed, and they come crashing down! This last throw makes the curriculum come full circle back to the beginning. Very clever!

In modern day judo, after learning a few sets of these throws, we start to learn the “kata” or “form” of throws. Katas are much maligned and misunderstood in the Western world. They seem like dances with little connection to fighting. What the kata is instead is a response to the question, “What are the minimum number of throws I should truly master?” Kano and his team chose 15 throws out of the 40 for this ultimate selection of Judo techniques. In his day, the kata was trained right from the start of Judo, but now we leave it for later as a kind of review and perfection of what we already learned and an insight into what lies ahead. Perhaps a different team of Judo experts today looking back with hindsight and a century’s more experience of Judo might come up with a different selection from what Kano made, but in any case these 15 are those which Kano and his team chose. You can think of these as “go to” moves. Beginners may think the first move is rather silly, but it is used more often than you might suppose in competitions, often as a response to an overcommitted attack. The kata moves parallel the “radical” or “root” parts of Kanji (Chinese characters) according to which “radicals” kanji dictionaries are arranged. These throws are the root throws and the “dictionary headers” for the rest of related throws.

Kano and his team certainly valued throws over all the other techniques in Judo. They thought of fighting for throws as much more physically demanding than ground fighting and also much more challenging mentally due to the speed of the action and its constantly changing nature. He writes, “for anyone who might be tempted to learn one or the other, throwing techniques definitely take precedence.” Also, “If groundwork is undertaken first, later chances to learn nage-waza [throws] may be few or non-existent.” However, he does recommend eventually becoming proficient at ground fighting too. He nowhere suggests that ground fighting is not part of Judo. Ground fighting is an intrinsic and inseparable part of Judo. Ground fighting techniques though were not organized by Kano and his team into educational sets the way the throws are, and Judo rules have always favoured victory by throw. Be this as it may, Judo rules have also always permitted and rewarded decisive ground fighting techniques such as inescapable pins, chokes and armlocks.

Hopefully this essay has been helpful in aiding you to understand the rationale for the Judo curriculum and also what you can expect to learn by studying it! Thank you for reading!

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