

What is Kata?

by

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Syd Hoare once asked me “What is Kata?” Coming from him I knew it was not a simple question, so I answered “Kata is anything that is not the true thing”. There was no need to elaborate, and as I was still wet from the shower, I was glad of this. For those I don’t know, and who don’t know me, I will try to explain what I meant.

I will call what most people know as Kata in Judo, that is, a set of differing techniques, “Listed Kata”.

To me Uchi-komi (Repetition Practice) is Kata. Uchi-komi, usually done with Uke standing still in a certain stance, the thrower, if that is what he is doing and not training at Katame-waza, can move in say nine times just picking the partner up to the point where his feet just start to leave the mat, and where very little more effort would throw the partner. Shall we call this point complete Kuzushi, or the point of Kake? Then on the tenth time the partner is thrown. I believe this Uchi-komi should also be done with the partners taking one or two steps before the technique is performed. To go on from this system it could be done on the move in a modified form of Ran-dori, but where the partners take turns at the technique.

So far I hope you will agree this is Kata, as there is complete cooperation.

Ran-dori (Free Practice) is a form of Kata. In fact Prof. Kano called the Nage-no-kata and the Katame-no-kata the “Ran-dori-no-kata” so he thought there was a connection before I did. It could be argued that the two Kata were to be studied before Ran-dori was attempted. Many Martial Arts schools do not allow “Free Practice” under certain grades, and controlled training, like this, that keep trainees safe were of course part of Judo.

We can’t say all the techniques in these two Kata are now used in Ran-dori. Ashi-kan-setsu-waza was allowed in early Judo, but as there were some injuries to legs, they were banned in Shi-ai (Contest) and so also in Ran-dori.

When I started Judo, in Britain there was a restriction in place on Sute-mi throws for people below Ikkyu (First-kyu-grade). As a nil grade, my first injury came about by someone trying a Sute-mi-waza on me that he had seen in a demonstration. I still have trouble with that injury, and agree with caution when it comes to what techniques are suitable for what grades.

Prof. Kano also called Kata the Grammar of Judo and Ran-dori the composition.

Ran-dori is misused when it is used as Shi-ai (Match, contest). The Ran-dori training sessions should be used to hone up certain points of our Tokui-waza (favourite technique), to try out our Tokui-waza with other techniques in differing combinations. We should also try out techniques we are weak at, especially if the partner is below out standard. A battleship should not use its big guns on a fishing smack.

While we are doing these things we will be countered, if the partner is working on Kaeshi-waza. We will also leave ourselves open, to the partners techniques, especially if he is using his Tokui-waza.

As we are competing, not against the partner, and he should be thought of as a partner not an opponent, we should be competing if anything against our own self, we can lose in Ran-dori only by wasting our own time and effort by a bad attitude.

Like in the Olympics, we in Judo should always be in pursuance of excellence.

To go from one extreme of Ran-dori, that of fighting all out, to the other extreme, of being over cooperative, even jumping for the partner must be avoided, if Ran-dori is to be a worthwhile training method.

This kind of Ran-dori, which must be carried out correctly, I see as Kata. Even training with the Listed Kata, there are many pit falls, but they are the same ones that we have to avoid in all other training in Judo.

If the partners are equal in skill and have a little competitive spirit, they could fight for the first ippon, then for the rest of the training session, get down to the real learning training, that of getting more than the partner out of the session.

In some Traditional Martial Arts they have a form of training like Ran-dori, and it can be called Ji-Yu-Kei-Ko, or whatever word the school uses.

Shi-ai (Match) I think of as Kata as a step in training for higher level Shi-ai (the Olympic Gold?).

To give another example of my idea why Shi-ai could be thought of as Kata. Many students start Judo with the aim of learning Self-defence. Coaches please note. Any contest this kind of student has will certainly be Kata.

With the strict rules of Shi-ai, most of the most important parts of Self-defence training, those against blows, kicks and weapons, for the life or death struggle the student had in mind, will be missing. He will also be restricted to using techniques, and even grips, allowable in Shi-ai.

Apart from the boundaries put on techniques in contest, the scores used in contest can lead to misunderstanding by the student if he thinks any kind of win is acceptable. There is no Ko-ka win in Self-defence, so there should be none in training.

At the inception of Judo, contest came in as an important part of training. Later contest was needed to make Judo into an international sport, but it was never thought of as a whole method of Self-defence.

Having said what I think Kata is it will be seen that I think Kata cannot be avoided in Judo, and Kata is where we can see the application of the principle of Ji-ta-kyo-ei.

Let me now talk some more on the listed Kata.

Listed Kata has a bad press in Judo in the West. One reason is the difficulty with the translation of the word into English, maybe the reason I was asked the question in the first place.

Even T.P. Leggett, for his books on Kata, calls it "Formal Demonstration". I have a great respect for him, and I admit all the words used, form, etc. don't fill the bill and a long-winded explanation is no

good on the front of a book. The thing is, if we think Kata is either formal or a demonstration or even both of those things together, we get led down the wrong path.

When Kata is performed as a demonstration of high standard Kata, it will be formal, but the demonstration only takes a few minutes, while the training to get to this stage takes hours and hours of hard work most of which is not formal and never a demonstration. If the training is too formal, I think the Kata will never get to a decent standard.

We have another problem with the word “formal”, or is it the same problem as with “Kata”? Formal, in relationship to Kata, to me means all the moves to get into the technique, directions and positions on the mat, even the order of the techniques. The bows can be less formal, a Tachi-rei (Standing Bow) at the beginning and end of the whole session is sufficient instead of a Za-rei (Kneeling Bow) demanded in some Listed Kata.

No matter what the session was about, even if I were to go into the Do-jo to sweep it out I would carry out one bow on entry and another when leaving, so I don't consider this formal, just ordinary Judo politeness.

Each of the Listed Kata, have do's and don'ts that apply in particular to that Listed Kata and deserve a long study, but let us continue with a general look at what is Kata.

I have already mentioned training with Kata, and if only we take a glance at the Eastern Martial arts, we will see that this is the true use of Kata. The schools all have Kata as a main method of training, some have Kata as the exclusive training method (see G. Koizumi's book).

People don't seem to notice that Kata is also used in the West. Here again maybe because we don't have a word for it.

In the Royal Navy they had a Kata, where a field gun is supposedly taken into the mountains where various problems had to be overcome. One problem was a small opening where the gun and limber had to be dismantled and after being passed through the opening put back together again. There was also a problem where the gun and limber had to go over an obstacle, and there was even a chasm that had to be crossed. The gun of course had to be fired at the end of each journey, which is the whole point of taking a gun on a journey.

This training Kata, like all good Listed Kata, is about as near the true thing as one can get without putting the trainees at undue risk. In the case of the gun, in the true thing there would of course be problems like snipers shooting at the team, but even in the armed forces you cannot have this kind of danger in training.

Judo began as a Martial Art, and to keep this tradition we need the Listed Kata. “Tradition” is another word we could spend time on, but let us move on and look some more at the irreplaceable practical use of Kata.

We must read up on what Kano said to find all the details of what he thought Judo should be, but one thing is obvious all Judo training must be safe to carry out, if it is not safe it is not Judo.

For the sake of safety some techniques were banned from Shi-ai. This had an influence on the unwritten rules of Ran-dori.

Those potentially dangerous techniques, leg locks, wrist locks, spine locks and such like were not banned entirely, they are now in the Listed Kata, where they can be learned by Tori and yet keep Uke safe.

So Judo Kata and Martial Arts Kata are used for the same reason, safety in training.

A thing that is easily overlooked in the Listed Kata are the things the attacker, Uke, must learn.

In the Kime-no-kata and Go-shin-jutsu, for example, Uke must learn to use a sword, a knife, a stick and a gun.

Uke must also learn non weapon techniques such as kicking, poking, punching and hitting in other ways, to name just a few things that help to broaden the, dare I say it, the Judo education that cannot be learned in Judo sport training.

If the Judo education were as broad as it should be, I think we would attract and keep more members.

Each of the Listed Kata can be looked-on as a study on its own, but a careful look will show us that the whole list has a balance so that each of the Listed Kata compliments the other Kata.

For example we see the attack Ryo-te-tori (Both-hands-held) in Kime-no-kata, Go-shin-jutsu and Juno-kata, and in each Kata there is a differing response. So, by the practice of these Kata, we learn there is more than one way to react to, at least, this attack.

We know how much effort we have put in to learn just one throw. For our Tokui-nage-waza we are traditionally told we need to carry it out in practice a hundred thousand times before we can be said to have anything like a facility for the throw, (See T.P. Leggett's article "The Cherry Tree"). We know even then how difficult it is to pull it off in a competitive situation.

Banned in Shi-ai but in the Listed Kata, are throws that should be easier to execute, those that are done with a Kan-setsu-waza (joint-technique). Uke's balance is broken, not only by Tori, but by Uke trying to ease the danger to his joint. Sometimes this kind of throw can be continued into a holding position with the Kan-setsu-waza still in place, so is very efficient in this way.

Also the Katame-waza (control-technique) is sometimes finished with Uke held in a face downwards position, which is better in Self-defence.

If I can sum up, I think all training, in Judo is Kata. Judo I think is a complete system on its own, and if wholly used is a broad enough "Church" to attract and satisfy new members and keep those already in Judo with plenty to learn into old age.