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From the Mat to the Street: Judo and Life

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My Judo teacher was always yelling “Relax!” I could not understand. Was I really so tense that he singled me out for this admonishment? Didn’t he realize that yelling “Relax!” only made me more tense?

In competitive tournaments I often did not do well. It was embarrassing to be thrown by men weaker than I, and I often felt that I didn’t understand, really, anything about Judo. I remember one tournament clearly. My opponent was a big brown belt. As he attacked I was afraid he would throw me—and in the same instant I heard my teacher’s command “Relax!” echoing like an electric current in my body. I softened; and in slow-motion-time absorbed the attack, then simply threw him to the mat. I ran to my teacher and embraced him. This may have seemed strange to others who knew us. I had won matches before, but this was the very first time I had done so from understanding. I think he knew.

Afterwards, I looked at him differently. Before, when I practiced with him I had only felt his strength, his hardness. Now I began to sense that underneath this hardness was a deeply studied capacity for relaxing at just the right moment. I made a personal vow to study this myself.

The word “Judo” can be translated as “The Way of Softness” or “the Way of Yielding.” All the time I have practiced Judo I have pondered the meaning of this idea, puzzling given the strong force commonly used in the art. I had been told a number of different interpretations but none seemed convincing to me. After this experience I had my own basis for understanding the word I had just discovered one meaning in the athletic principle that a certain tempo of relaxing the whole body can absorb harmlessly even a powerful attack. Later other meanings opened up also. I came to understand a deeper secret, one concerning awareness: with a relaxed erect posture and a light grip on the opponent, it is possible to sense his moves almost sooner than he does them. To practice this successfully took a great deal of work to break my beginner’s habit of stiff-arming my opponent away from me, out of fear, which made it impossible to feel him. Yet another practical meaning of “Ju” is that by allowing the opponent to move in his own way, yielding to his movements and

following them with one's own body, one receives direct impressions of the essence of the other person. At times there is a kind of non-verbal dialog that is very subtle.

I noticed that most people who were good at Judo had only a partial understanding of "Ju": their Judo was a mixture often containing more hardness than softness. Two or three times I met people whose Judo was almost completely softness, and they were not only highly effective, it was a joy even to be thrown by such a man. Though I am an advanced practitioner, now holding a third degree black belt, I never quite reached this level. But I often remembered to aim for it.

Judo is meant as a training for life. Historically, it was defined as a formal body of practice during the late nineteenth century, a period in Japan of renewal of ancient spiritual and aesthetic ideals and schools. The "Do" part of "Judo" means "Way," both in the sense of the way things naturally are, and in the sense of a path for people to follow to reach harmony with this way. It is the same word as the Chinese "Tao." Judo is part of the education of a schoolboy, and is considered to provide a basic foundation in Japanese cultural and spiritual values: discipline, respect, mutual dependence, fortitude, resourcefulness, craftsmanship, and so on, in addition to the most mysterious value: softness, the "Ju" of Judo.

After World War II Judo was adopted enthusiastically in the United States and even more so in Europe and Latin America. In the West it was pursued more as a sport; but in my experience as a student it seemed to me that many of the original values could still be found in it. This was true even though these values are rarely spoken about, unlike in other Oriental martial arts in the West. Judo's teachings are somehow implanted in the rituals and experiences of actual practice, and are learned mainly through the body rather than the intellect.

I have often asked myself how the things I learned in Judo have become a part of how I am in life, and how this is for others whose Judo I came to know. Certainly it is not always true that the values of Judo translate directly to life situations, or that when they do the effect is always beneficial. A process of conscious practice is necessary to naturalize and embody any new value in a new context, and it is a mistake to assume that the results of practice in one arena can transfer unconsciously to another.

Of numerous cautionary examples one comes to mind. A certain teacher whom I studied with for a while was an extremely accomplished master. I never met anybody his equal in skill. He had developed powers that were almost supernatural-his body could take on a gravity that made him immovable; and when he was seriously fighting his eyes glowed with a disturbing fire. I once asked him how he had become so good. He told me this story: He had been an athletic prodigy in his village, and when he

went away to college in Tokyo his reputation preceded him. But in the big city he soon met Judo men with much more experience who easily deflated his pretensions. His sense of shame at losing was so great, to men he considered inferior, that he would not be able to sleep. He would lie awake all night going over and over in his mind how he had been defeated, and analyzing what he could do to prevent it, resolving never again to lose in that way. After hundreds of such defeats, he had lost in every way possible, and no way remained for anyone to defeat him.

This story illustrates in a very concentrated form several of the principles of Judo, especially the principle called “mutual benefit”: one fights seriously in order to help the opponent practice; one defeats him in order to help him learn something he needs; and of course when one is defeated one allows oneself to be helped by it, and tries hard to understand the lesson. Through such practice this man had indeed acquired bodily powers far out of the ordinary.

But his Judo practice did not correct a certain defect of character, which was that he had a cruel streak. In fact, it made this defect worse, since he had the means to indulge his weakness, and opportunities to justify it to himself in the name of teaching someone a lesson. With and without justification, he hurt people, once or twice seriously. In business he showed the same combination: indomitability combined with a certain cruelty. It did not work as well in business as it did in Judo. At one point, according to stories I heard, he and his partners were bankrupt and were facing criminal charges for some kind of dubious actions.

I do not know why he had left Japan; perhaps if he had stayed the moral discipline of the teaching would have eventually been able to help him. But as it was, he lived a lonely and somewhat bitter life.

One must always be careful in applying the experiences and methods of a path outside the path. In its most basic form, this is taught to all beginning students of martial arts in the commandment not to seek opportunities to apply the art on the street. It is not only that the techniques might be dangerous to unprepared opponents—they also might prove not equal to the situation. The Ju of Judo is not necessarily what is required in a street fight, at least not until it is thoroughly mastered. A relish develops for the intensity and immediacy of physical struggle—but it may be better to leave that taste on the mat.

The question is broader than intentional application of techniques. There are ways of moving, ways of responding to challenge, ways of relating to people, that the student of Judo discovers creeping into his whole life. He is likely even to take pride in this. A Judo student may often have the experience of being flattered by others who notice

the way he moves “from his center.” In relationships of emotion the problem is more complex. It takes years of repeated practice under a watchful teacher to learn how to bow to an opponent in a way that expresses the right respect. Toward a peer, this respect includes the willingness to attack vigorously, acknowledging the opponent’s ability to profit from being attacked. But what happens when one’s business colleagues, or one’s domestic partner, experience the half-conscious expression of this attitude toward themselves? What kind of discipline, and how long, would it take to refine this attitude until it could be felt by others as an expression of love, in life as it is in Judo?

What then can be taken from the mat to the street? In the traditional teaching of Judo, there are three principles that are explained to students as a foundation for the path. These are: non-harmfulness (i.e., do not injure the opponent or oneself); mutual benefit in study of the way; and work for self-improvement. I think that the reason these are selected for special emphasis is that they are what Judo tries to teach for life.

There is a certain moral logic by which these principles taken all together can support a well-rounded approach to any situation. Each of the legs of this inseparable tripod provides a correction to the potential imbalance of the other two. A man may help himself, and help others, but if like our earlier example he does not master non-harmfulness, all his powers will turn to poison. Or if someone fails to work diligently on self-improvement, he will never learn much, and even if he tries to help others, his efforts will be useless and they may even mislead and do harm. Or if a man works on himself, and never does harm, but does not help others learn what he has learned, he fails to repay his debt to the teaching, and the arrearage will stop him at a certain point.

A wise teacher once told me that what is of value is never the habits and skills acquired from practice, but the understanding that results from consciously undertaken struggles. This is what many people do not understand who naively look to martial arts, or other practices, for a magic key to success. Repeated practice always gives results, but these results, he said, actually become an enemy because they tend to become part of a person’s unconscious nature. Especially if these habits are effective, they tend to reinforce the person’s vanity and laziness.

Useful practice, according to this teacher, is practice that is based on consciously accepted principles, such as the three principles of Judo. It values the struggle above results. The struggle is ultimately always a struggle to be aware of one’s laziness, inattention, carelessness, misunderstandings, one’s tendency to rely on habit, and other defects of character. This then is what may be taken from the mat into life.