

The Dynamic Nature of Kata

An Interview with Steven R. Cunningham

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Steve Cunningham is a respected authority on martial arts and on Classical Judo in particular. Cunningham began his study of Judo at the age of 6 with Taizo Sone, who was a direct student of Jigoro Kano and uchideshi to Hidekazu Nagaoka (10th dan). Cunningham was trained in all aspects of traditional Judo and was uke and uchideshi to Sone Sensei. He is well versed in Japanese history, philosophy, language and culture, and is an expert with the sword and jo as well as other battlefield weapons. Cunningham Sensei teaches Classical Judo and Takagi-Ryu Jujutsu at Ju Nan Shin Martial Arts Academy in Manchester, Connecticut.

The Kodokan today recognizes a number of official kata. What are the origins of each of these kata and what does each contribute to the complete syllabus of Judo?

How many kata there are depends on how you count. The first two kata that are typically taught and learned are the so-called *Randori no Kata*. These are *Nage no Kata* and *Katame no Kata*. *Nage no Kata* is the Form of Throwing, and *Katame no Kata* is the Form of Grappling. The kata are not specifically kata to teach you how to do randori, but rather they are kata made up of techniques that are also used in randori. The old Kodokan used to differentiate between randori waza and goshin waza. Randori waza are techniques that are appropriate for randori and goshin waza are techniques that are not appropriate for randori. Now that is not to say that the randori waza would not also be used in self-defense. It simply means that among all the techniques, those are the ones that one would be allowed to use in randori. So for example, kote gaeshi, throwing with wrist twist, would be a good example of a goshin waza. It is not legal to apply that technique in randori. But certainly we would apply osoto gari in self-defense. So that's what these two kata are about. Both kata were developed, I think, in 1888, and they were then modified and standardized with two major revisions: one in the summer of 1905 and one in the summer of 1907. This was in response and in preparation for the kata and syllabus committee that Kano put together made up of various masters from the Kodokan and from various ryu that had agreed to help him. It was quite an illustrious group of people that went to work on the kata and syllabus.

The *Nage no Kata* is attack-based and self-defense oriented. It teaches the principles in the context of strategies of combat. *Katame no Kata* incorporates techniques which are not directly applicable, in most cases, to self-defense. It has a little bit of a different feel to it. Both kata, though, give a lot of insight into how the various strategies of combat are applied through the randori waza. Sometimes the *Gonosen no Kata* is included among the *Randori no Kata*, but it is not on the modern Kodokan 'approved' list, and was created by Kyuzo Mifune, tenth dan.

We also have *Ju no Kata*, which is an old form as well. *Ju no Kata* is the Form of Ju, the Form of Gentleness or Suppleness. It is designed to give one a feeling for an engagement in which there is an attack, a defense, a counter to the defense, a counter to the counter, and so on, so you get this exchange back and forth, and you get to see how the supple responses to each movement unfold. Because of the nature of the kata, the attacks and defenses are all quite abbreviated and the principle of *ju* is highlighted. *Nage no Kata*, *Katame no Kata* and *Ju no Kata* were all constructions by Kano. There are a lot of influences on the kata. *Ju no Kata* was not limited to Tenshin Shinyo (some give this as Tenjin Shinyo) and Kito influences, so it has a lot of techniques which we more associate with other ryu. But Kano had a pretty rich background, so he was able to incorporate those.

We have *Kime no Kata* as well. *Kime* is an interesting word. It refers to some sort of decision. One can think of it in terms of like a court decision, an adjudication where something is decided. And so there's a sense of finality and decisiveness and a hint of a sense of contract, as in the old duels. But it's a form of life-and-death struggle. It at one time was called *Shinken Shobu no Kata*, which meant the form of real fighting. And so the form incorporates various weapons and what were real world attacks in the time of Kano. The *Kime no Kata* was constructed by Kano but it is designed to embody the Tenshin Shinyo Ryu information, so it is a bit of a conglomeration of kata from Tenshin Shinyo Ryu. People who see it who know Tenshin Shinyo Ryu are often struck by the similarity in techniques.

Another kata is the *Koshiki no Kata*. *Koshiki no Kata* means the Form of Antiquity, or the Form of Ancient. *Koshiki* is essentially the central kata of the Kito Ryu school. It's a very lofty form. It has a lot of ethereal context. Kito Ryu means 'rise-fall' and reflects the yin-yang of Chinese philosophy. It's a very meaningful form. It focuses on very high form art. The participants at this point are thought to be above push-pull, grab here, using leverage, momentum and so on, and they move to a point in which they are expressing themselves through the technique and they are applying the techniques based on concepts of rhythm and motion and feeling and that sort of thing. The *Koshiki* and *Kime no Kata* together are designed to bring forward this knowledge from the old ryu that Kano first started with, the Tenshin Shinyo and Kito Ryu. They give a sense of what the old ryu looked like. They also show us an example of how the old ryu can be preserved in the Kodokan syllabus. So they're carried forward in the public syllabus to demonstrate how the old ryu are being preserved.

The idea is also that the basic syllabus of the Kodokan—the Go Kyo, and the *Nage*, *Katame*, and *Ju no Kata*—all give you the foundation to understand *Kime* and *Koshiki*, but these operate at a higher level. They have more advanced principles and they are designed to teach you things like strategy, ma-ai, ri-ai, all these other kinds of higher concepts. They are designed to elevate you even more beyond these basics. So to do *Kime* or *Koshiki* without first having a good grounding in the Go Kyo and the *Randori no Kata* and so on, would just be meaningless. You're totally unprepared to take the lessons that these kata are going to provide you.

Also in the Kodokan syllabus is the *Kodokan Goshin Jutsu*. Notice that it isn't called *Goshin Jutsu no Kata*. This is because the *Goshin Jutsu* is thought to be a plan of study of self-defense techniques (goshin waza), as opposed to being formally a kata, although it's often demonstrated that way. The *Goshin Jutsu* is a construction of the 1950s, when 21 masters came together to construct a modernized form of self-defense to be taught in the Kodokan. The most influential and probably the best known to us in the West of those members was Tomiki. Kenji Tomiki had been a student of Kano and had also, by arrangement of Kano, studied under Ueshiba, of the aikido school. Tomiki was also sent around to other of the traditional ryu, by Kano, to people that Kano knew and had made arrangements with, like Aoyagi at Sosuishi Ryu (also pronounced Sosuishitsu Ryu) and others. All of that old knowledge was brought to bear in the construction of the modern *Goshin Jutsu*. There were earlier *Goshin Jutsu* which are no longer practiced. They were discarded, hidden away for various reasons, and there was a feeling that there was a need for a *Goshin Jutsu* but the Kodokan wanted a modernized version. And so that was why they called together these instructors and asked them to construct this art. So this is designed to teach the goshin waza, whereas the *Nage* and *Katame no Kata* teach the randori waza.

An old kata that Kano constructed in the 1880s was *Seiryoku Zenyo Kokumin Taiiku no Kata*. 'Seiryoku Zenyo' is what we often refer to as the principle of maximum efficiency. It actually means to use your life energies in the most effective and most just way. 'Koku' is 'country', and 'kokumin' is 'national'. 'Taiiku' is a system of exercise. *Seiryoku Zenyo Kokumin Taiiku* is a 'system of national exercise based on the principle of maximum efficiency', and it is a kata. It is a solo kata, and it is one of the few solo kata that exist in Judo these days. It is made up of practice of atemi. This is a place to learn the basic principles of atemi, the punching and kicking and all that.

There is also the *Joshi Goshinjo* and the *Kime Shiki*, which are referred to as kata by some people. I don't think the Kodokan formally treats them as kata these days. These were the construction of Jiro Nango, who was Kano's nephew and who took over the directorship of the Kodokan after Kano died. He managed the Kodokan through the war years, World War II. Kano had been concerned about the Kodokan being taken over by the military as a place to train soldiers for combat in WWII. To that end, a lot of the old methods of goshinjutsu were hidden away and weren't publicly taught any more. And after WWII ended, with the Occupation forces, the Kodokan couldn't operate at all for a while. When it did operate, it was under some restrictions. And so the goshin waza weren't taught. Jiro Nango constructed the *Kime Shiki* and the *Joshi Goshinjo* because he thought there was a need to preserve the self-defense techniques for the women, in the Women's Division. My understanding is that he was not a Judoist at all, and in fact, had his training in Daito Ryu Jujutsu. But we forget that the Kodokan was a center of martial art activity and not just what we think of today as sport Judo. There were lots of masters of lots of arts at the Kodokan. As late as the 1920s they were teaching wooden staffs (jo) at the Kodokan, so there were lots of people there in different arts. There was a sense of preserving certain concepts by making them into this kata and then teaching it in the Women's Division. In the highly male-dominated society and unfortunately, even in the Occupation forces, attitudes were very sexist, and so there wasn't much consideration given to looking to see what they were doing in the Women's Division. So that sort of thing worked out very well.

The Kodokan was turned over to Risei Kano about the time of the Korean War. I believe that Risei Kano was an adopted son of Kano, and he also wasn't a Judoist. So the leadership in the Kodokan changed greatly from the time when Kano was running it to the later directors, and this had some effect on the construction of kata, and so on.

There is also a modern *Renkoho*, which are arrest methods that they teach to law enforcement officers. They are basically a dozen come-alongs that are taught for controlling somebody who's being aggressive in some way and hauling them off, and maybe to handcuff them. There were older versions of *Renkoho no Kata* as well, but they are no longer practiced at the Kodokan.

Also, there is *Itsutsu no Kata*. Itsutsu is an old way of saying 'five'. We think of ichi, ni, san, shi; but there's also hitotsu, and so on, which are an old Japanese set of numbers. *Itsutsu no Kata* is the Form of Five. It's five techniques. It was constructed by Kano as his sort of ultimate kata. It is often referred to as the 'unfinished' kata because the techniques are apparently unnamed. Kano went to a lot of trouble to try to distill all of martial art into the minimum number of principles that would be necessary to explain it. He thought there were five governing principles upon which all martial art was based. This number five is not an accident. The number five has a lot of significance in Japanese and Chinese philosophy. They believed that there are five elements in the heaven and earth and that all of creation is made up of five elements. Just as we, in modern science, think there are, whatever there are, 108 elements on the periodic table, and everything is constructed of those. To the Japanese and Chinese there were five fundamental elements from which all else was constructed. So this made a lot of sense to have five principles, from this philosophical point of view. But Kano didn't come up with this connection. The five principles had also been taught through earlier versions of oshikiuchi, they'd been taught in Takeuchi Ryu and Takagi Ryu, and other ryu as well. They were the same principles or some variant thereof that Kano thought could still be distilled back to these same principles. So where some ryu would think of their five principles as being different from another ryu, Kano thought that he had found the five principles that subsumed all the others. They are often described by reference to physical phenomena, so that they have at least some tangible expression. And so one technique might be modeled by the idea of an ocean wave that sweeps over the land and overcomes things that way. And then a tornado is another one, and so on. Kano thought that there were five basic components. It isn't convenient to give them a brief name, like the name of a throw. But they are there, and they are the underpinnings of the ryu, so they are quite important. *Itsutsu* is the highest kata, with only five techniques. Kano thought that the art should culminate. He believed that Judo moves from the specific to the general. I've heard some people argue that Judo moves from the general to the specific. People argue that the early techniques like ogoshi, seoinage, and osoto gari are the ones that have the most use, that they're the most general, and that the advanced techniques are only useful in very bizarre, very unique situations, and therefore aren't as valuable—they're very specific. When in fact Kano, I believe, intended for his art to operate in the opposite direction, that you would move from the specific to the general, and that one would eventually learn to abstract entirely from individual techniques and operate wholly on principle. And that that's when you're the most powerful. If when somebody grabs ahold of me, if I think, oh well, if I pull here and push there and turn my body and sweep this way and do that, by the time I've figured all this out and analyzed this on a technique basis, I've been thrown down. It's over. But if I understand some overriding principle that tells me that when something like that happens this is what you do and I just do it, based on principle, then I'm much faster, much more effective and there's much more sense to what I do. Kano was trying to distill to a higher form art so that you could be elevated above technique. That is where you want to be; you want to be operating at that level, responding to the flows, the motion, the rhythm of what's happening, the pressures on your body, and not really thinking about individual techniques. That's when you become effective; that's when you become able to defend yourself on the street. We often hear that Kano had people like Yamashita, Yokoyama, Saigo, and others, who came in from other ryu, and then a few years later Kano has them fighting for him. They become legendary because of the victories they won in the big tournaments at the Kodokan. I'm thinking in particular of the big tournament of 1886, when they had a team

contest, and the Kodokan beat the other Jujutsu ryu. Some people have argued that that means that really Kano built the Kodokan based upon the strengths of these people who had studied in other Jujutsu schools and that he really didn't teach them much. The realities were that they weren't the champions they were until they met Kano and studied with him. His unique ability was his insight; his ability to really understand what was going on at the center of things, and how to teach that to other people so that they operated at a higher level, according to higher principles. And so he took what they knew and he made them better at it by showing them the inner principles, the inner workings of what they were doing. And that's what this program is designed to do. It's designed to take you to that high-form art.

There are other kata which are not currently recognized by the Kodokan, such as *Go no Kata*, *Ippon Yo Goshin Jutsu no Kata*, *Gonosen no Kata*, and others. What are the origins and nature of these so-called 'lost kata' and why do you think they are no longer widely known?

There are various reasons why these kata are 'lost'. The *Go no Kata*, for example, was the Kata of Hardness, which is the counterpart of the *Ju no Kata*, which is the Kata of Softness. *Go* and *ju* are the opposites of one another in the Japanese thinking. Kano was rather insistent that the central principle of Judo was not *ju*. This is a big misconception. He thought that we tend to characterize the martial art Jujutsu by *ju* because it is the apparent mode of operation that one gives way to strength. *Ju* has also the meaning, though, that one is supple, one is agile, and one uses suppleness and agility to win; not just overpowering people. *Ju* also has the sense that the body is responsive to the will. The body yields to the will, so whatever I want to do I can do. That implies a kind of mental-physical coordination and a very special kind of agility that is probably a better way to identify Jujutsu as a martial art. And so there is strength used in Judo. There is hardness used in Judo as well, and this is why Kano did not make the principle of *ju* the controlling principle of Judo. Rather, he identified *seiryoku zenyo* as the controlling principle because it had the more general application. He said that there are times when it's appropriate to not yield and there are times when it is appropriate to yield. Kano said,

By giving away, a contestant may defeat his opponent, and as there are so many instances in Jujutsu (Judo) contests where this principle is applied, the name Jujutsu, the 'gentle' or 'giving away' art, became the name of the whole art. ... But strictly speaking, *real* Jujutsu is something more. The way of gaining victory over an opponent by Jujutsu is not confined to gaining victory by only giving away.

The point of it is that in every occasion you use the most appropriate means, the most efficient means, the most just means, to get the job done. And that is what is expressed in *seiryoku zenyo*. It's obvious that he didn't want that misconception to continue, because in his lectures he often talked about this problem, so he wanted to have a *Go no Kata* to counterbalance the *Ju no Kata*. And so he constructed one. The kata was constructed right around the turn of the century. That's an important thing to recognize, because some people argue that he constructed the *Go no Kata* with a mind to incorporating Okinawan karate into Japanese Judo and that he got the idea after becoming a close friend of Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of Shotokan karate. It is true that Kano and Funakoshi were good friends. Kano was instrumental in bringing Funakoshi to Japan. He took him under his wing; he showed him the ropes. They talked a lot about the future of martial art. The modern karate-do, as opposed to karate jutsu, is a result of Funakoshi recognizing that Kano's idea of taking Jujutsu and making it Judo was a good idea. In the modern era, with modern weapons and so on, it might not be as critically important to the military feudal state, which also no longer existed, to continue martial art training. But the value of martial art training had never changed. So karate ought to be continued to be practiced, but with a view to developing the individual. So Kano and Funakoshi were good friends; Shotokan was traditionally taught at the Kodokan, and Kano and Funakoshi discussed techniques and methods together. Kano even learned some of the karate kata. But all of this happened in the late nineteen teens and after. It did not happen before 1900. One has to realize that Funakoshi was quite a bit younger than Kano and that he would not be old enough to be instructing Kano at the time that Kano designed *Go no Kata*. The fact that there are a lot of *atemi*, as well as throws and other things in *Go no Kata* is not an indication that it comes from karate, but rather that there are a lot of karate-like elements in Jujutsu. In fact, when Funakoshi saw an exhibition of Jujutsu by Hironori Otsuka, who was *menkyo kaiden* of Shin no Shindo Ryu under Nakamura, Funakoshi supposedly ran out on the floor and said to Otsuka, "You've studied Tode [the old name for karate] in Okinawa, haven't you?" And Otsuka said that no, he only practiced the Jujutsu. And so Funakoshi discovered that there were a lot of very common elements in the two arts. Otsuka became a student of Funakoshi and ultimately became the founder of Wado Ryu karate. Wado is the harmonizing way, and he was harmonizing or blending Jujutsu with karate. The *atemi* was very strong in Jujutsu, and in fact Tenshin Shinyo Ryu was one of the pre-eminent *atemi* schools. Kano had learned this since youth and it was appropriate to put it into the kata. The kata like *Go no Kata* were hidden away, though, in the pre-WWII years, I'm told, because of the fears that Kano had about the Kodokan being used as a training ground for soldiers. By the 1920s the nationalistic fervor had gotten quite strong in Japan. Kano was quite concerned about it all. He began his All-Japan Cultural Movement in the 1920s trying to turn the tide and get people to take a more cosmopolitan view. He did not feel he was successful. He made some inroads, but he was not successful. He also made the mistake of making himself a target of the nationalists. They felt that he was a Western sympathizer and did not recognize the true strength and destiny of Japan. Some argue that that resulted in Kano's death. So, with all that in mind, Kano and the others sort of tucked away the *Go no Kata* and essentially 'obsoleted' it. They said there were problems with it and they would just no longer teach it. They stopped discussing it publicly.

A sidenote is that Kyuzo Mifune, tenth dan, constructed a different *Go no Kata* during the WWII years. He intended it, I think, to replace the older one. Variants of Mifune's *Go no Kata*, probably reflecting different stages in the development of his form, appear periodically, adding to the confusion regarding *Go no Kata*.

As for the other kata, for example, there were earlier *Goshin Jutsu*. There was *Ippon Yo Goshin Jutsu no Kata* and *Fujoshi Goshinjutsu no Kata*. As for *Ippon Yo Goshin Jutsu no Kata*, 'ippon yo' means 'general'; it's the general self-defense art that was taught to everybody. There had to be some place to learn all the *goshin waza*, which was the other half of Judo. You have *randori waza* and *goshin waza*, and if you're going to teach the full syllabus, you have to teach both. There was also *Fujoshi Goshin Jutsu no Kata*, which was the women's version. What it really meant was that it was the techniques which are special to women's attacks; it focused on those specifically. These two kata, like the *Go no Kata*, were sort of 'lost' before WWII, quite deliberately I think, and the loss of them gave rise to the *Joshi Goshinho* and *Kime Shiki* that appeared in the Women's Division during WWII, and the new *Goshin Jutsu* which appeared in the 1950s as a result of the research group that I mentioned earlier.

There were also several *Renkoho no Kata*. Renkoho are arrest methods. The old *Renkoho no Kata* (there were several of them) involved torinawa or hojo jutsu, which means rope tying. In the old days, the police didn't carry handcuffs; they carried a piece of rope, or several pieces of rope in their belt. And so they would take down to the ground the person they wanted to arrest, and in a few quick motions tie them right up and then take them off to jail. The kata did not typically involve doing the actual rope tying. Rather, it took the opponent to the ground and set him up for the tying. But the kata were focused on the concept of rope tying. So they were thought to be kind of out of date in the modern era where people use handcuffs. It also became sort of problematic because the other thing that you would have to learn were the kata involving actual torinawa - rope tying. So if you want to teach the Renkoho the old way, you have to teach the rope tying. That was thought to be less interesting by later Judoists, so they sort of let that go away. Rope tying was originally taught at the Kodokan. In some editions of the book Kodokan Judo, there are pictures of rope-tying techniques in scrolls held today by the Kodokan.

There's also *Gonosen no Kata*, which is a good example of a kata created by someone other than Kano. There are others, but this is a good example. *Gonosen* was constructed by Kyuzo Mifune, tenth dan, and it's practiced at some universities in Japan. At Waseda, I think, they practice *Gonosen*. It's also popular in Europe. *Gonosen no Kata* is the kata of go no sen. Go no sen is a strategy, one of the three basic strategies, which can be very loosely translated as 'counter technique'. It's a little more complicated than that, but it involves counters to throwing attacks, and so it is a kata of counter throws. There were other kata that were brought in by the entering ryu to the Kodokan, and those were preserved there as well. But those are no longer practiced. I think that the intention was that there would be a general syllabus of the kata that we've mentioned, and then after one studied and mastered all that, then you might go off and start learning the central kata of the various ryu. So what you would have at the Kodokan was essentially an archive of all the old ryu. To this end, the kata were preserved, and Kano kept a collection of scrolls, books, and artifacts.

What are the purposes and ends of kata as originally intended by Kano?

The idea of kata that Kano would embrace would naturally be the concept of kata which exists in the koryu, the old schools. Kata forms the centerpiece of the old ryu. In fact, many of the old ryu had no randori of any kind. Some did have something that we might loosely call randori, that is, something that's a little more unstructured, but they were very limited in how much of that they allowed. This was largely because the techniques were very dangerous and it was thought that going at that in a wholly unrehearsed fashion could prove to be fatal. So they used kata as a centerpiece. These are prearranged reenactments of battles or prearranged mock exchanges. They also provided a means for sustaining the ryu, for sustaining all the detailed information that needed to be passed on from generation to generation. It's hard to take something as complex in movement as fighting and make some notation on paper or something which allows you to reconstruct that later. All the ryu depended upon these kata to allow them to carry forward the exact information from generation to generation.

You have to remember that Japan was united under the Tokugawa around 1600 and for roughly 275 years the Tokugawa ran Japan. They didn't allow much in the way of wars. And so the samurai, the warrior class, had to find some way to preserve their skills in essentially a peaceful society. It's a problem we have even today with our own military. How do you keep your military prepared in a peacetime era? The kata provided a means for refining and preserving all the information from generation to generation. They never knew when they would have to go fight again. The kata and the kuden, the spoken transmissions, became a vital component of the total package that's passed down through time.

The kata also provide a system of checks and balances to ensure that the techniques are done correctly. The thing I think of when I think of kata is my grandfather in his blacksmith shop, where he had metal frames which he used to lay over things that he built to measure them to make sure that they matched the correct size and shape. This was from before we had mass production and replaceable parts. So the blacksmith had to have certain forms of measure to ensure that the piece was made correctly according to the right specifications. That particular tool that he used is called a 'form' in English, and in fact, it is a picture of that which is written in the Japanese character which reflects the word 'form' in Japanese. The kata provides the means of checking the student to ensure that he or she is doing things in the correct way. So obviously just throwing the throw or making the punch isn't enough. Along with the kata are preserved exactly where the person should fall relative to the thrower, or which direction the punch should move and in which direction uke must respond to that, and so on. There are very careful checks there to see what's going on in the execution of the technique. Moreover, there's a system of diagnostics so that where uke ends up as a result of the movement of tori, for example, gives you information about what you're doing right or wrong. It gives you tests for each movement. It's all based upon a system of direction called the embusen [kata line].

Kata was recognized as the centerpiece of martial art. It was essentially like a plan of instruction which the founder could use to ensure that everybody got the same lessons down the line. That's not to say that the kata could not be modified in some way, but this would be done only with the utmost care and consideration. More likely, other kata would be created rather than the old kata changed, because you want to add to the knowledge, not try to change or pervert what had been developed before. So Kano would see the kata as providing the foundations, the structure, for the transmission of the principles, which is what he considered the most important to teach.

Could you expand upon the significance of the kata line (embusen) which you mentioned? What was Kano's purpose in designing a linear practice form for what we know as a largely circular movement-based art?

The 'bu' in embusen is the 'bu' in budo or bujutsu; it's 'martial'. 'Embu' is something martial or military; it reflects some sort of military action. 'Sen' is literally the line. So this is the line along which warfare is conducted. The embusen is very important. It would run 90 degrees perpendicular to the battle line on the old battlefield. On the battlefield, people were lined up across the field, maybe a dozen warriors deep or so, and they go charging at one another. Or maybe one line stands in defense and the other line comes charging forward. The idea is to move through the opponent's battle line to get to the military objective behind. So if you're trying to storm the castle, they'll have soldiers lined up maybe a dozen or more deep around the castle as you go charging in, and they're going to fight you off. But you've got to get to the castle. That's what you're there for. So you're penetrating their line, moving perpendicular to the battle line. The embusen tells that story of going through that line

of soldiers. The way that you work through a battle line is not by just walking straight through it. If you meet with the person right in front of you and kill him, there's one right behind him, of course. As you move deeper into this line, there are also people on either side of you. It's likely that as they see you moving through and moving toward the objective that they're trying to protect, that they're going to turn from either side of you and come toward you to try to stop you. So you move into the battle line, and then you have to turn and go back a little bit. You've got to address the ones who are rolling in behind you to try to catch you. So you move forward and back, forward and back on the embusen. The embusen reflects this idea of warfare in the old battlefield sense. Having the *Randori no Kata*, particularly the *Nage no Kata*, operate on the embusen, is very important. It reflects the combative nature of Judo, and this is even more highlighted by the idea that we're using entirely randori waza but they're all being applied to a battlefield situation. It's very profound, and Kano's trying to make a point there. Even in what would appear to be the most harmless of kata, he's putting something that has very important battlefield applications.

The embusen also provides the alignment for this kata. Since you're moving up and down the kata line, all the techniques can be measured against this line. The attack is made down the kata line and then tori turns and throws. If everything was done right, if the attack was right down the kata line, tori makes the defensive movement and uke is thrown at some angle or other relative to the line. For each technique there is a prescribed angle and position for where uke should land. If uke lands in the wrong place, we know that something's wrong; either the attack or the defense, or both. But we also can look at where uke lands and determine *what* went wrong. We can actually diagnose from the landing position who went wrong and in what way. In this way, by including that diagnostic component in the kata, it makes it a complete means for preserving the art. We know how uke has to land and we know what went wrong if he didn't land where he was supposed to. We're able to correct the technique until uke and tori each do their parts correctly. Then we know that we've preserved the kata in just the way it was intended. If you ignore this diagnostic component, then you're just throwing, in *Nage no Kata*, 15 throws. But you're not doing kata. If you want to do the kata, you have to have this evolution of the attack through uke and tori, and you also have to have the diagnostic and the correction so the form is preserved. Without that it's not kata.

Is there a special meaning in the fact that of all the kata, only *Nage no Kata* and *Seiryoku Zenyo Kokumin Taiiku no Kata* are practiced on both the right and left sides?

This is a very important fact. This is not an accident. I think some people find this to be a boring aspect to the kata, that it repeats itself on the other side. But I don't think they recognize just how profound that notion is. This isn't made clear to you unless you've practiced kata in an old Jujutsu ryu. The traditional Jujutsu ryu, the koryu, practiced the techniques largely on one side. Specifically, the technique is demonstrated according to the attack, and the attack is made in the usual way, which puts it on one side. For example, a Japanese swordsman using the katana always stands a certain way and his grip is always a right-handed grip. There are no left handed swordsmen. So the attack always comes in a certain way because of that. The wrist can only turn in certain ways. The responses to sword attacks entail always responding against one side. The sword is always worn on the left hip so that if you draw the sword it's always going to be with the right hand from the left hip. All the techniques operate according to that and not the other way around. Kano was revolutionary in that he said 'We're going to practice the techniques on both sides. We're going to be equally adept right or left.' In fact, this turns out to be a very powerful thing to have to your advantage, especially when you're fighting against people who do favor a side. We've all seen that in randori and shiai. We take this as sort of for granted, but for Kano's day, this was quite a change. So we find that the Go Kyo no Waza is practiced all 40 throws right and left. That was the traditional test for the first black belt - Go Kyo right and left, and also *Nage no Kata*, which also forced right and left. Not only did you learn the throwing techniques in their basic forms through the Go Kyo, right and left, but you also learned how they were applied in the self-defense setting from a strategic point of view in response to attacks from the right and left sides as well. This made Kano's people ambidextrous. In fighting against other Jujutsu ryu in tournaments of the 1800s, it made them deadly. Everybody was completely surprised and overwhelmed by these people who came out and could grab and throw right or left with pretty equal ability. So Kano was saying we need to balance things out and we also need to fill out the matrix of possibilities. There shouldn't be obvious holes in our training. As I mentioned, the swordsman only holds a sword right-handed, and so even in the self-defense application you only have to worry about the attack being from the right hand. But Kano said let's go ahead and let's assume the attacker is left-handed. If I do my usual right-handed defense against his right-handed grip, that's one way; if I do a left-handed defense against his right-handed grip, that's another way. And then you practice right and left-handed against a left-handed grip as well. And what starts to happen is the individual moves from the idea of a rigid defense against a rigid movement and starts to work through principle and feel. That makes him or her a more devastating fighter. It also has the side effect of balancing out your physical training so that all parts of your body are equally trained. This gives your body balance and it also activates the meridians, the acupuncture channels, equally on both sides, so it has health benefits as well. This was quite a profound change, and formalizing this into the kata was quite a change for the Jujutsu schools.

It's been said that kata 'tells a story'. Could you give an example of a story or lesson from the Kodokan kata?

The kata that people know most, probably, is the *Nage no Kata*. In the *Nage no Kata*, there's an engagement between two people. It is in a self-defense situation. Uke and tori are both learning as they go. Uke is learning and adapting his or her attacks based upon the experiences of the kata, the experiences of the engagement. That's why we see uke subtly changing each attack step by step through the kata. In essence, this makes every technique in the kata but the first one a combination technique because uke is always adapting and adjusting to tori based upon what uke learned from the previous techniques. That's pretty important.

In the second set of *Nage no Kata*, Kano is telling the story of his experience with Saigo. Saigo was a young, quick-witted, agile student. Kano often used his favorite technique, uki goshi, against Saigo in randori. Kano was devastating with this technique, and Saigo took very hard falls as victim to Kano's uki goshi. Saigo came up with a defense. When he saw Kano move in the general direction of uki goshi, Saigo would take a flying leap in the direction of the throw, hopefully 'stepping over' the attack. At first this worked. Soon, though, Kano adapted another technique into the randori-waza, so that when Saigo jumped over the uki goshi, Kano swept back and around with his thigh, catching Saigo in mid-air. We call this technique harai goshi. Saigo realized he was now falling even harder than before. Those straw mats sting! So Saigo decided to try something else. This time when Kano attacked uki goshi, Saigo arched backward strongly, thrusting his hips into Kano. Kano quickly changed from the waist grip, snatching Saigo's collar high, while dropping very low with his own hips. Boom! Saigo got buried in the floor

once more. We call this technique tsurikomi goshi. The techniques are done in the second set of *Nage no Kata* for this reason. Originally, the second and third techniques were done in a way that reflected this attack-defense-new attack sequence. It commemorates this exchange between Kano and his early student. Of course, all of this is lost in the modern method.

When teaching kata, you have referred to both 'kata' and 'igata' as critical concepts in understanding the purpose of kata. Would you explain the significance of these terms?

There are actually two characters in Japanese which can be pronounced 'kata' and both are used in reference to what we call kata. One of them can also be pronounced 'igata' and I was always taught to differentiate the two as 'kata' and 'igata'. 'Kata' is the one we use when we say *Nage no Kata*. The fact that we do that is important and provides certain information. 'Igata' is static; it references a static form. The form doesn't change. It doesn't adapt to the individual. It is a rigid measure. 'Kata' is dynamic. It's a much more difficult concept. Some of the old ryu used just the term igata to refer to their forms and it reflects the notion that there can be no deviation from this standard method. The 'kata' reflects something much more dynamic going on.

One way I can explain this is to compare it to the old concept of Shu Ha Ri. Shu Ha Ri is the sort of general progression that one goes through in training, where 'shu' means to imitate. In the beginning the student is told to do exactly what the teacher does. It has to be exactly the same; there can be no deviation. Any attempt at individualizing is strictly forbidden. If you deliberately try to individualize, even after being corrected, the Jujutsu master will just throw you out of the dojo. There's just no room for that, not at that point. You don't know enough to be deciding how to individualize. But after the basics are mastered, and you really understand what's going on in the technique, then you move to the 'ha' of Shu Ha Ri. Ha means that you start to diverge from the strict form because now you're understanding the technique and it's starting to become alive in you. You're starting to become the technique. You're starting to make it yours, and you are able, with the careful guidance of your instructor, to shape that appropriately. Not only do you now know the standard form, which you should be able to teach, but you also understand how that standard form is adapted to each individual. To become an instructor, you have to understand how to adapt that to anybody's body, in any situation, not just your body in the situation that you face. So it's quite a large task to understand how the technique is modified without losing the strength of the technique. And then 'ri' means that you eventually entirely separate from the teaching. There's a couple of different meanings to this. One is that the student is now ready to go on their own; they've become fully functional and the art is them and they are the art, and therefore they aren't bound any more by what they're doing. They feel a certain freedom. This is like a painter who masters the strokes and the basics and then can sort of escape from them. Because now having mastered them, they no longer have to think about them. So that form becomes not a confining thing but rather a liberating thing. It allows you to go beyond the confines of rightness and wrongness in the stroke because now all the strokes you make are correct. The same thing is true with the technique, that you are escaping the restrictions of the technique and in fact you are able to make the technique work no matter what.

We start with the kata, and first we learn just the basics, the kihon. We learn how to move and how to block this and where to put our feet and things like that. This gives way to the notion of going 'into the kata'. That's the term that's often used. They say 'He's in the kata; he's into the kata.' And that means that you no longer are actually thinking on that functional level of block here, step there, do that; but rather, you're responding naturally to the attack, but you're doing it fully within the structure of the kata. This is like igata, this is the rigid form and you're now fully into it and you are being controlled. It's like walking in a tunnel. You can't get lost; there's nowhere else to go. You walk straight down the tunnel and you're there. And you feel like as you move you are putting your body into a physical mold which makes your arms and legs and hands all go into the right spot, and it just happens. But you don't have to think about the individual movements of putting the arms and legs here and there. You just fall into the mold. Your body is shaped by the kata. Your technique, your mind, everything is shaped by the kata; you are into the kata. On the far end, as you approach this 'kata' as opposed to 'igata', you are now going back out of the kata. Now you're actually fighting and your body naturally conforms to the kata as it is appropriate to do. When the attack is made in the prescribed way, the kata presents the most efficient way to defend. But as uke and tori are real people, with all of the errors and deviations that humans are likely to make, if the attack deviates a little bit, tori naturally responds with the appropriate defense, and they move within the battle as opposed to moving within the strict confines of a rigid, static form. So you become elevated above kata. This is where the high form art starts to occur. So this is a very important stage in development.

We have heard you tell a story about Daigo and something that happened to him during a kata exhibition. You described Daigo as having been 'in the kata'. Would you repeat that story here?

We are talking here about Toshiro Daigo, who was an All Japan champion and is a highly respected, well known Judoist, who is still living and at the Kodokan today, I believe. Daigo-sensei was giving an exhibition, in the 1970s I guess it would be, at the annual Kagami Biraki Taikai in Japan, and he was demonstrating *Nage no Kata*. His uke, at a certain point in the latter part of the kata, made the wrong attack. They were supposed to start the ma sutemi waza. They were supposed to come back to the center and meet for tomoe nage, I guess it was, and uke instead turned and made the striking attack for uranage. And Daigo didn't miss a beat. He immediately moved perfectly into position to receive the blow, made his uranage, threw uke exactly where he should be. Perfect technique throughout; never batted an eye. And at about the time he hit the floor, uke realized what he had done. He had done the kata out of order. But realizing that Daigo wasn't at all flustered by this, uke got back up and turned around and just did the left side attack for uranage as well, and Daigo did it. And they did the rest of the techniques in that set and filled it out. In fact, many people didn't know anything had happened. They didn't notice that they had done it out of order. Others, who did notice it, were particularly impressed, because it reflected that Daigo wasn't doing this step by step. He wasn't just looking for tomoenage. He wasn't just doing the rigid form, but rather he had risen to the point where he was responding to the attacks and was engaged in a real fight. And so naturally, he was responding to the attack, whatever the attack was. *Nage no Kata* is attack-driven based on strategies of dealing with certain kinds of attacks. So when the attack came, he was responding to the attack, and it was not confusing or difficult for him to deal with in any way. This reflects the extremely high skill and high level of training and ability of Daigo. And it's a perfect example of this idea of going into the kata and then back out of the kata. He had taken kata to the highest level, to that dynamic level, in which he responded fully to the attack, and wasn't trapped by 'Oh my gosh, this should have been tomoenage; now what do I do?'

When you teach kata in class, you teach not only the demonstration (omote) form by which most people identify the kata, but also the hidden components (ura) which make up the underside of the kata. Please describe each of these components of kata, and when or how each is taught in relation to the other.

Omote is the front part; it's the front side, and ura is the reverse, or the underbelly. So the omote is what you see and the ura is what you don't see right away. The demonstration kata, the one that we're used to seeing, is really like the tip of the iceberg. The real meat of it, the real large part of it, is below the surface. It's in the underbelly; the ura. The ura is what makes the kata into an entire program of study. There have been some books out; for example, one by Otaki and Draeger, in which they talk about the *Randori no Kata*. The book, as I recall is only about *Nage no Kata* and *Katame no Kata*, and they fill a whole textbook with just those two kata. There's a lot to learn there, but even that doesn't reveal all of the ura of the kata. The ura includes many things. It includes the bunkai and oyo. These are the analysis of the kata and the applications of the kata. The analysis involves a variety of things. It involves studying the yoten, the key points of the techniques; what makes them work in each case. It involves studying the henka, the variants of the attacks and defenses so you have a wider range of knowledge than you're limited to within the omote. It also has to do with knowing the defenses and the counters; the fusegi and the kaeshi waza.

The way that I was taught the kata was that first of all, if there was some particular principle to the set or grouping, then we had to understand that, of course. And then as we do the techniques in sequence it's important to understand enough of the ura to explain what's really going on, the key points of each technique, how they relate to the attack, to all of uke's behavior. In *Nage no Kata*, for example, you practice an active and a passive version. This way you're forced to understand why the gripping changes the way it does, why the techniques operate the way they do, and you understand the logic of the sequence. It's not just a random sequence. You have to get enough of this ura to make the kata come alive so that you really understand what's going on. And then, after the kata is completed, then you go back through it again, and you start to fill out the adaptations, the variants, the other kinds of points. But I want to emphasize that you need a sizeable portion of the ura to learn the kata at any level, just to make sense of what's going on in the kata. It would be absurd to teach kata without understanding what the movements mean.

Each movement is very logical, and each movement is important. It's there for a purpose; it teaches you something. You need to understand what those things are. Kata have lots of subtleties in the omote which are designed to tweak your memory about some key point that you need to know from the ura. So they have subtle movements and they have kakushi waza, which are hidden techniques. You have to understand what's going on. What does this allude to? What is this attack that's going on that I'm supposed to recognize? This becomes particularly important in some kata, like *Ju no Kata*, which is an entirely shorthand kata. Every part of it is shorthand. You don't complete any technique in *Ju no Kata*. No attack, no defense is completed. They're all shorthand, so if you don't know what each of those techniques is, you don't know what's going on. They're all completed in the ura. Quite often in the *Ju no Kata* you'll have an attack, a counter, a counter to the counter, and a counter to the counter to the counter. What are the techniques? That means in one 'technique' you may have four; so if you don't know what they are, you've missed the whole thing. You need to understand the techniques and how they relate to each other. But if you have a kata in which you have a technique and a counter, the implication is that the first technique failed. Why? That's what the kata is going to teach you. So that you don't make that mistake. So you have failures built into the kata to teach you how not to fail. And what else does the kata teach you?

In *Ju no Kata* you have an attack, you have a failure, you have a defense, and then you have a counter to the defense. So if someone attacks me, and I try to defend, and I fail at my defense, how do I recover? Is it over? No, it better not be, because I die! So you have to have an attack, a defense, a defense to the defense, and a defense to the defense to the defense. You better have several layers deep of these things so that the first time you make an attack or you make a defense and it fails, that you have a way to respond. That's how you build a complete body art. This is the kind of thing that's going on in the kata, and without understanding the ura you'll be lost to all of that. And so you have to teach enough of the substance to get through the kata and understand what's really going on. Then you have to go back through it and really explore the richness of the kata. The kata typically has got lessons at many, many levels: at strategic and tactical levels; at rhythmic levels; at distancing levels; at levels of balance and motion and all sorts of things. They have to be fully explored in order to draw from them.

The modern omote techniques of *Nage no Kata* are executed differently from the way Kano originally did them. Do the modern forms reflect lost connections with the ura or does the ura change with the changes to the omote?

The *Nage no Kata*, for example, had some major revisions in the summer of 1905 and again in 1907. Then there were periodic changes made largely after Kano's death. The original *Nage no Kata*, as an example, as demonstrated, had some different throws in it. There was no kata guruma in the kata, and the kata included sukui nage and osoto gari. Also, the techniques were done in a different way, some of them. At one time some of the throws were done in different directions, and so on, reflecting the different kihon that were considered for those forms. So the ura also was different because the omote was different. However, these days, I don't think anybody much practices ura any more. So in that sense it's kind of moot, if all that's done is to go through the motions of the demonstration forms. I think kata has become somewhat unpopular, in the long term sense. I think more recently, in the last ten years or so, kata has staged something of a comeback, specifically in terms of kata competition. But the competition is based upon the demonstration form and on nothing else; it would have to be done on the demonstration form. So these other facets of kata haven't been explored. But who knows; maybe that will come. I'd like to think so.

If you change the omote, the ura would have to change with it, or it wouldn't fit any more. The question is, how do you change the kata? Are you considering the attack to be different? Because then if it's a different attack, you would expect a different defense. If the attack is the same, then why would you change the defense? I think that doesn't always make sense. There have been some subtle changes in kata over the years that seem to be more related to someone, like a judge, being able to watch a technique and being able to tell easily whether or not certain aspects were done correctly.

For example, in the '60s we had problems with people doing kata. At that time kata was not popular in the U.S. People often did kata with uke just jumping for tori. So tori really did relatively little on some of the techniques. It became important to really try to tell whether or not the throw was actually being done by tori or whether it was a result of uke jumping. And so some adjustments made to techniques like kata guruma were done so that we could tell that the weight was actually being supported by tori. That doesn't really have much practical sense in terms of

how it would affect the ura. But other major changes have occurred. For example, in *Nage no Kata*, tsuri komi goshi was originally a combination technique. Now it's not done as a combination. The whole notion of the combination is lost, essentially, so the ura there would be relatively meaningless in that context. I think a lot of information about how the techniques relate to the ongoing story has been lost as well.

In Otaki and Draeger's Judo Formal Techniques, there is a long discussion about what Kano intended to teach regarding combative initiatives (go no sen; sen; sen-sen no sen) and uke's role as either active or passive in *Nage no Kata*. How was this taught to you and what do you understand to be uke's role in the kata?

The kata is very rich in that if you perform the kata with uke passive you get one set of lessons, and if you perform the kata with uke active you get another set of lessons, especially on some techniques. I was taught to perform it both ways as a way of drawing out these lessons. If uke is always active, always aggressive, that is, uke always makes attacks and tori only defends, then of course only one kind of strategy can really prevail. You have primarily a defense strategy. But if tori takes the initiative, now you've got something else going on to make this more rich.

Go no sen, sen, and sen-sen no sen are three basic forms of strategy that Kano had in mind when he created the *Nage no Kata*. Sen means 'first'; sensei means 'first born'. Go no sen means to take away the initiative, to steal the initiative. Your opponent attacks; he comes first, and then you steal his initiative from him and overturn him. It typically involves some sort of counter technique, either as a direct counter, or as some way of sort of re-guiding the attack in some way. And so if uke is always active, always the aggressor, and tori is the defender, then the implication is that all tori can be doing is defending. Now occasionally, tori can respond by just beating uke to the punch. If he does that, then basically he is taking the initiative. But it's sort of a part initiative. It's still in response to uke's attack. This is sen. There's no way tori can take sen-sen no sen if uke is always the attacker, and always attacks under his or her own initiative. Sen-sen no sen means something like 'first first of first', with the implication that if tori applies sen-sen no sen, tori is actually the aggressor, but he's making uke feel as though uke is the aggressor. That is, he sets the stage in such a way that uke's attack is really what tori wants him to do. He's leading him into a trap and in this way is able to guide uke into using his strength to overcome himself. This is considered the highest of the three forms of strategy. To do that, though, would necessitate that tori actually becomes the active one, at least in some of the techniques. So you have to practice the kata with both uke and tori active.

A balance to this is a version of the omote form which we practice as the ultimate form, as the correct, final omote, which is with sometimes uke active and sometimes tori active. The attacks are different, and at times uke gets sort of befuddled, and doesn't quite know where to go from here. He immediately gets seized by tori, who then extracts the attack that he wants from uke, and then is able to overcome him. And this makes all three of the major strategies taught in the kata and is what Kano, from his notes and from his lectures, intended. To really get this richness from the kata you have to practice both the active and the passive parts. Kano did not intend that Judo would be purely defensive in the sense that somebody attacks and you fall back under the force of their attack and defeat them. That's the classic 'ju' thing that we often hear. But in fact sometimes you give way, sometimes you tai sabaki out to the outside, sometimes you create a binding or a friction against the opponent, sometimes you actually lead the opponent or beat them to the punch. You do all these kinds of things; whatever is most efficient in each case. That is seiryoku zenyo. That is the overriding principle. Sometimes it's much more efficient to lead uke or to make the first move on uke once the intention of the attack is established.

The modern practice of *Nage no Kata* is focused on the omote (competitive standard) form. Today's practitioners often state that much of the value of kata practice derives from the development of precision and attention to detail of the techniques and to general movement education involving kuzushi, tsukuri, timing, balance, leverage, and momentum. In the traditional teaching of kata, however, there was an emphasis on other types of principles, such as Shizentai no ri, Ju no ri, and others. What are the differences between the modern perspective on kata principles and the original principles which Kano emphasized?

Some of the elements which I've already mentioned, such as strategy, and uke and tori being passive, and what mechanisms tori uses to overcome uke; these are some of the higher levels and are the key points of the kata.

You can practice the individual techniques with precision and detail in the Go Kyo or they can be practiced as kihon for the atemi or whatever. You don't need to do kata to do techniques with precision and detail. You just need techniques. So obviously that's not the purpose of kata.

But the principles which one studies in the kata are larger principles, such as Shizentai no ri, the principle of natural posture, and all that that really means, and Ju no Ri, the principle of gentleness. But also, one studies how to control ma-ai (distancing), ri-ai (how one creates synergies with the opponent), use of ikioi and hazumi, (momentum and force); and how one opens to avoid a conflict, or how one spirals in to create a binding action which then overcomes the opponent. All of these kinds of studies are embedded in the kata. The *Nage no Kata* is created as a kata which is driven by attacks, and which highlights higher principles and strategies. The techniques themselves are just components. They are ways to tell the story. That's why it was possible for Kano, for example, to take out sukui nage and put in kata guruma, because he was trying to tell something about principles and there were any number of techniques that could be put in there. The specific technique wasn't the point. But to apply a certain kind of principle against a certain kind of action would create an interaction between uke and tori which would put uke in a certain place and have him overcome in a certain way. And so to tell that larger story, Kano creates the kata. These are higher principles; these are not just simple body mechanics. Those you would learn with the individual kihon, the individual techniques.

Kano designed *Nage no Kata* to align with the Go Kyo no Waza in order to highlight specific strategies and principles. Can you explain what some of these connections are?

The Go Kyo no Waza has a multidimensional structure which creates an elaborate matrix of principles of various types and dimension. It's a

much more elaborate construct. The *Nage no Kata* is more of an enumeration of approaches to fighting. It doesn't have that grid-like structure like the Go Kyo. But of course you can go through each technique and identify the principles which are being taught there. That's what the kata becomes, is the catalogue of those principles. Those are being played against the various kinds of attacks and responses, whether active or passive, whether sen-sen no sen, and so on; they have to be all played out. In the omote all the dimensions aren't mapped out but through the ura you would go through and identify all the various combinations. It's a very rich study.

What is your advice for today's Judoka regarding the best way to study kata? Do you feel that kata is relevant to modern sport Judo?

The best way for anyone to study kata is get with a good instructor who really knows the kata and don't be satisfied unless you understand what's going on. Because there is something going on! It's not just some rote dance that one performs. There's a lot to be learned in the kata. If you don't understand what's going on in the kata, you'll never perform it correctly. It takes a lot of practice and a lot of patience. You do need to devote the kind of energy to it that you devote to the rest of your Judo training. This notion of taking kata and doing it a few weeks before promotion because you have to, and just trying to put something presentable together and forgetting really understanding it—you're never going to learn kata that way. You're going to miss out on a big chunk of Judo. I think it's critical that you devote the time to it that it deserves, and that would be a sizeable portion of your time. Kano argued that something like 15% of your time in Judo should be devoted to kata. And that's probably about correct if you look at the total time you spend in Judo. So if you practice 2 hours 3 days a week, that's 6 hours; times 4 weeks is 24 hours a month, or so; say 25 hours a month. Fifteen percent of that would be less than 4 hours a month. The idea is that you should be devoting a sizeable part of your energy to it and not just once in a while trying to walk through *Nage no Kata* because somebody told you you needed it for promotion. Is it relevant to modern sport Judo? Of course it is. It makes you understand the techniques but also, more importantly, to understand about strategies, distancing, rhythm, tactical information, different methods of overcoming the opponent. There's an awful lot of information there that you're not going to get, probably, any other way. That's why it's in the kata. That's what the kata can teach. It is not enough to just walk through the omote, though, and expect that that's going to do a whole lot for your randori. It isn't until the kata becomes alive and you start to operate in the kata like you do in randori that it's really going to become meaningful to you. That isn't going to happen by just an occasional pass by the kata.