

## A brief characterization of *Nippon Kempo*

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2013年11月30日受付      2014年1月28日受理

### Introduction

Of the numerous forms of martial arts that have been developed in Japan, *nippon kempo*, or *nikken*, as it is commonly referred to, is one of the least well-known. While a significant number of Japanese universities have *nikken* clubs, the number of people in Japan who practice *nikken* is relatively low, and in comparison to, say, *judo*, it would be difficult to say that *nikken* has a strong international profile. However, it is precisely because *nikken* has not been “internationalized” in the way *judo* has that consideration of the establishment of *nikken* in the early Showa Period promises to help us better understand not only the systemization of traditional martial arts as sports but also Japanese culture in general.

Here, in addition to providing basic information on the practice of *nikken*, by considering the historical context in which it was developed and comparing its development with that of *judo*, I try to characterize *nikken* in a way that will be of interest not only to martial artists, but also to scholars of Japanese culture in general.

Since April 2011, I have acted as the assistant director of the *nikken* club of the Osaka University of Health and Sport Sciences. The club, which consists of students at the university, practices together with the *nikken* club of a high school that is located on the same campus, and affiliated to the same educational corporation, as the university. Many of the observations presented here are based on my involvement with the club.

### The Practice of Nikken

The Chinese characters for *nippon kempo* are 日本拳法. The first two of these characters mean “Japan”; the third character means “fist”; and the fourth character means “way” in the sense of “method” rather than “path”—a distinction that will be returned to later. *Nippon kempo*, then, can be thought of as a Japanese “way of the fist” or even a Japanese form of kungfu, although it should be distinguished from *shorinji kempo*, a Japanese martial art with many similarities to Shaolin kungfu.

*Nikken* is a full-contact martial art that incorporates a wide range of techniques including striking, throwing, joint locks, and ground combat. One of its most distinctive features is the use of comprehensive protective gear.

A detailed explanation of the rules is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, however, are simplified translations of some of the rules provided in the program of the 58th All-Japan Student Kempo Tournament.

- A *nikken* bout is contested on the basis of strikes (e.g., punches and kicks), reverse joint locks, and lift/control techniques. If a throw or immobilization is applied effectively, a point shall be awarded only if the advantage is capitalized on with a strike.
- A point shall be awarded for a punch only if it exhibits *kime*, if the opponent does not obstruct the punch with a block, if the punch directly hits a prescribed part of the opponent's body, and if there is no element of luck. For a punch to exhibit *kime*, it must be accompanied by a shout of sufficient intensity, and must have sufficient power and skill to knock the opponent down.
- A point shall be awarded for a strike if it is obstructed by a block that is weak and judged to have insufficient effect.
- Penalties ranging from "warning" to "disqualification" shall be applied in the case of rule violations.

It should be noted that partial points, such as the *waza-ari* and *yuko* of *judo*, are not awarded.

It is evident from the second and third rules above that a lot rests on the judgment of the referees. If there were a movement to promote the internationalization of *nikken*, this would perhaps be the largest obstacle.

Here, it is worth considering the case of *kendo*. While the practice of *kendo* is highly valued in Japan, it has not been internationalized to the same extent as *judo*. Inoue (2004) notes the negative attitude of the *kendo* community toward the inclusion of *kendo* as an Olympic sport, and points out the difficulty of making the requirements for a valid strike more objective. These include a shout of sufficient intensity, proper posture, correct blade trajectory, and continued alertness following the strike.

### **The Establishment and Spread of Nikken**

*Nikken* was developed by Muneomi Sawayama. He founded the organization, the *Dai Nippon Kempo Kai*, shortly after graduating from Kansai University, in 1932. The *nikken* club of Kansai University was founded in the same year, making it the starting point for *nikken*.

Here, the difference in historical context surrounding the development, respectively, of *judo* and *nikken* should be noted. *Judo* was created in the early Meiji Era, a time when westernization was very much in vogue, whereas *nikken* was created in 1932, a year before Japan left the League of Nations.

Regarding the prevalence of *nikken* in modern-day Japan, data provided by the *Nippon Kempo Kai*, arguably the foremost *nikken* organization in Japan, indicates that there are approximately 20,000 practitioners nationwide. (For comparison, there are approximately 200,000 people registered with the All Japan Judo Federation, although the number of people practicing judo in Japan is probably much higher than this, and

there are approximately 500,000 people practicing kendo in Japan.) The data includes the following. It indicates the approximate numbers of different types of clubs.

Type of club	Number
Public club	400
SDF* club	50
Company club	30
High-school club	40
University club	70

\*SDF: Self-Defence Forces; Japan's military forces

The following table, also based on data provided by the *Nippon Kempo Kai*, indicates the respective numbers of private, local public (e.g., prefectural or municipal), and national universities with *nikken* clubs.

Type of university	Number with <i>nikken</i> clubs
Private	58
Local public	4
National	4

Even though the large majority of Japanese universities are private, 58 is still disproportionately large. The data also indicates that 29, out of a total of 66 universities, are located in the Kansai region, whereas only 18 are located in the Kanto region. Again, this is disproportional. It would seem, then, that *nikken* spread from Kansai University through a network of private universities. Further investigation of the mechanisms that facilitated this spread and of the reason why this spread was curtailed may yield insights into the organization of sport at Japanese universities.

### From *Bujutsu* to *Budo*

The word *bujutsu* or *bugei* was used to collectively refer to the martial arts practiced by *samurai* during the Edo Period. These words eventually came to be replaced by the word *budo* in the Meiji Era. While *jutsu* means “skill” and *gei* means “art”, the character *do*, which can also be pronounced *michi*, means “way” in the sense of “path”. This trend of switching to the character *do* also occurred in the individual martial arts that were collectively referred to as *bujutsu*; *jujutsu* (for consistency, this spelling, rather than the English spelling, *jujitsu*, is used here) became *judo*, *kenjutsu*, swordsmanship, became *kendo*, and *kyujutsu*, archery, became *kyudo*. Actually, it was *jujutsu/judo* that lead the way in this trend, which occurred as part of a movement to re-package *bujutsu* to make it more attractive to Meiji-era society with its thirst for westernization.

In fact, this trend of using the character *do* extended beyond the field of martial arts. The words *kado* and *sado* became popular ways of referring to “flower arrangement” and “tea ceremony”, respectively. While these words had been used during the Edo Period, it was during the middle of the Meiji Era that their use became common.

The motive for this trend would seem to be that using the character *do* promoted the idea that the practice of these arts and skills yielded more general cultural benefits.

Incidentally, the character *do* and the concept that it represents can be found in the more general context of Japanese education. LeTendre (1998) analyzes the concept of “guidance” or *shido*, and characterizes the Japanese view of learning in terms of moving along a path.

It may be worth considering the possible significance of the absence of the character *do* from the word *nippon kempo*, although the following quote of Sawayama, which appears on the website of the *nikken* club of Kansai University, would seem to indicate that Sawayama clearly saw the practice of *nikken* as a path. (Here, “path” is a translation of *michi*, an alternative pronunciation of the character *do*.)

“Why endure such hardship when there is no reward? —Because there is a path.”

### The Development of *Judo*

Consideration of the development of *judo* is important because of the pioneering way it reinvented itself in order to be more compatible with the mood of westernization that pervaded Meiji-Era Japan.

On entering the Meiji Era, the *bujutsu* that had been widely practiced during the Edo Period went into a period of decline. *Jujutsu*, the unarmed martial art practiced by *samurai*, was no exception, and in order to help *jujutsu* survive, there was a movement, lead by Jigoro Kano, to modernize it.

Inoue (2004) gives nine ways in which Kano modernized *jujutsu*:

- (1) Systemization of techniques
- (2) Introduction of a ranking system
- (3) Establishment of rules for competitions
- (4) Organizational modernization of the *kodokan* (headquarters of the *judo* community)
- (5) Emphasis on educational value
- (6) Publicity activities
- (7) Internationalization
- (8) Popularization among women
- (9) Promotion as a spectator sport

While the worldwide popularity of *judo* and its acceptance as an Olympic sport bear testament to the effectiveness of Kano’s approach, it is necessary, when examining the evolution of other martial arts, to consider the palatability of each of these elements.

### The Modern Evolution of Japanese Martial Arts

To see *judo* and *nikken* in the context of the evolution of martial arts that took place in Japan in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, it might be helpful to think of the martial arts that developed during this period as falling into one of two generations of *budo*: a first generation consisting of arts that developed directly from those practiced in the Edo Period, and a second generation consisting of those

that followed. The first generation would include *judo*, which was developed directly from *jujutsu*, as well as *kendo* and *kyudo*. (Incidentally, *aikido* would also fall into this category as it was developed from a form of *jujutsu*, although it did not figure prominently in the central movement of reforming *bujutsu* into *budo*.) The second generation would include *karate*, *nikken*, and *shorinji kempo*. (Although the history of *karate* predates this period, it did not spread from Okinawa to the Japanese mainland until the early 20th century).

Thinking of the evolution of *budo* this way begs the following question: Why was there a need to introduce this second generation of martial arts? One obvious answer to this is the absence of striking techniques in the first generation of unarmed martial arts.

Here it is worth considering the conversion of *jujutsu* to *judo* in a little more detail.

The Chinese characters for *judo* are 柔道. The first character can be used to mean “gentleness”, “softness”, “tenderness”, or “weakness”, and also appears in the word *junan* (柔軟), which means “flexible”. *Judo* is often translated as “the gentle way” in English, which conveys the idea that, as a form of combat, *judo* places a great emphasis on the welfare of the opponent. This interpretation may not be inconsistent with the philosophy of modern-day *judo* practitioners around the world, but it is probably not consistent with the original intention with which the character was first used. The *ju* in *judo* was inherited from *jujutsu* and, as *jujutsu* was practiced primarily as a military skill, it is unlikely that consideration of the welfare of the opponent would have been a major element of its philosophy.

Most *judo* practitioners around the world are probably aware that *judo* developed from *jujutsu*. This awareness alone, though, may give rise to the impression that *jujutsu* was more similar to modern-day *judo* than it actually was.

A comprehensive characterization of *jujutsu* is beyond the scope of this paper. The following points, however, should be noted: (1) there were many schools of *jujutsu* and it would be misleading to think of it as a single, unified discipline like modern-day *judo*; (2) the practice of *jujutsu* was not as systematic and well-documented as that of modern-day *judo*; and (3) as *jujutsu* was practiced primarily as a military skill, it is unlikely that the different schools would have proactively discouraged the practice of techniques considered dangerous (e.g., strikes). According to one theory (Mol, 2001), the *ju* in *jujutsu* is most likely derived from a passage in an ancient Chinese military treatise. The passage, pronounced *ju yoku sei go* (柔能制剛) in Japanese, translates as “softness controls hardness well”, which gave rise to the idea that a weaker force should not try to resist a stronger force. In the context of martial arts, this was taken to mean that, when pushed or pulled, the weaker force should submit to the attacking force and thereby nullify it. Regardless of the historical accuracy of this theory, for the purposes of this paper, it would probably be helpful to think of *jujutsu* as a term used to collectively refer to unarmed martial arts that were practiced with the aim of giving an advantage over a stronger opponent.

It would seem, then, the elimination of striking techniques from *jujutsu* in its conversion to *judo* represented a fundamental change in its character and left a void that the second generation of *budo* sought to fill. Indeed, the following extract from the website of the *nikken* club of Kansai University would seem to reinforce this point:

“Removing punching and kicking techniques from an unarmed martial art is like removing the claws of a lion.”

This “declawing” of *jujutsu* through the elimination of striking techniques, then, is one possible factor behind the development of *nikken* and other second-generation *budo*. What other factors may there be? Another possibility that should be considered is that the modernization or, perhaps more accurately, the internationalization of *jujutsu* resulted in a sacrifice of cultural elements that was not palatable to some. The somewhat negative attitude of the *kendo* community toward internationalization has already been noted, as has the difficulty of making the requirements for a valid strike in both *kendo* and *nikken* more objective. Could it be that the shout that must accompany a strike is viewed as a sign of sincerity, and that the removal of this sign of sincerity would make the art less attractive to a Japanese observer?

### The Practitioners’ Perspective

Regardless of the history of *nikken*, a characterization would be incomplete without consideration of the viewpoints of its modern-day practitioners. In August 2013, a survey was conducted on members of the *nikken* clubs of Osaka University of Health and Sport Sciences and Namisho High School. At a joint summer camp of the two clubs, 21 members (university: 10 members; high school: 11 members) were asked to complete a questionnaire (in Japanese) consisting of the following six questions:

1. How long have you been practicing *nikken*?
2. Why did you start *nikken*?
3. Have you ever practiced any other martial arts? If you have, what did you practice?
4. What do you like about *nikken*?
5. Is there anything about *nikken* that you find difficult? If there is, what do you find difficult?
6. In comparison to other martial arts, what do you think is the most important characteristic of *nikken*?

The responses to question 6 are the most relevant to this paper and so they are presented below.

#### University

- It is practiced with safety in mind.
- We use a special form of punching called *hadoken*. We punch iron. Although *nikken* is a mixed martial art, injury is uncommon.
- We wear protective gear and so we can punch [each other] without restraint.
- It is a combat-oriented martial art practiced with protective gear. There is little risk of injury.
- It can be practiced safely. There is a wide variety of techniques.

- It includes two elements: standing and throwing techniques. I felt that this was a characteristic distinguishing it from other martial arts.
- We respect our opponents.
- It is practiced with protective gear and so it is safe. It incorporates consideration of injury prevention.
- The whole body is protected by protective gear and this allows full contact.
- The most important aspect is probably that the protective gear enables a level of injury prevention that is high compared to other martial arts.

### High School

- We must use a wide variety of techniques, including punching, grappling, and kicking.
- We wear protective gear, and so it is not necessary to stop short [when striking an opponent].
- If you wear protective gear and maintain correct form, you do not get injured.
- I don't know.
- I don't know.
- We wear protective gear and use punching, kicking, and grappling techniques.
- I think it is that we can use punching and groundwork techniques.
- We wear protective gear and so it is safe. Injuries are uncommon.
- We wear protective gear and so strikes [to the torso] do not hurt at all, although strikes to the head do hurt.
- There is a wide variety of techniques, including standing techniques, throwing techniques, and joint locks.
- We wear protective gear.

One thing that is immediately clear from these responses is the importance to practitioners of *nikken* (or young practitioners, at least) of protective gear and the way it allows unrestrained combat with little risk of injury. The wide variety of techniques also seems to be an important characteristic.

The responses, then, would seem to support the idea suggested previously that *nikken*, with its striking techniques and combat orientation, fills part of a void left by the conversion of *jujutsu* to *judo*.

Another noteworthy point of the responses that is hidden in the above translations is variation in the terms used to refer to martial arts in a general sense. Some respondents used the term *budo* while others used the term *kakutogi*. While the former is usually translated as “martial arts”, it is usually used in Japanese to refer to the martial arts that developed directly from those practiced in the Edo Period, such as *judo* and *kendo*—perhaps “traditional Japanese martial arts” would be a more faithful translation. *Kakutogi* is usually used to refer to more modern, commercialized forms of martial arts.

## Conclusion

This paper has looked at the development of *nikken* and has proposed that it grew partly in response to the creation of a void left by the conversion of *jujutsu* to *judo*. It has suggested that a major part of this void consists of the lack of striking techniques and other combat-oriented elements. The extent to which it also includes cultural and philosophical elements requires further consideration.

This paper has also noted the preponderance of *nikken* clubs in private universities in the Kansai area. This is another area warranting further investigation.

While this paper has raised more questions than it has answered, it has suggested that we can consider a martial art as being located at a point within a triangle described by the vertices “combat skill”, “sport”, and “path”. On the basis of what we have seen here, *nikken* would seem to be slightly closer to “combat skill” than *judo*, but this requires more investigation.

This paper (as well as my own personal involvement with the *nikken* club at my university) also suggests the existence of two types of internationalization, which may be termed “progressive internationalization” and “conservative internationalization”. In the former, practitioners willingly sacrifice traditional elements of their art in order for it to be more palatable to the international community, whereas in the latter, while practitioners are keen to welcome people from other cultures into their community, they are less keen to sacrifice traditional elements. The history of *nikken* would seem to have been influenced more strongly by the latter type of internationalization.

Note: This paper is largely based on a presentation made at the Joint East Asian Studies Conference 2013 (University of Nottingham: 7 September 2013).

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