

# Education and Self-Cultivation in Early Kōdōkan judo

Andreas Niehaus

## Abstract

When Kōdōkan judo was founded by Kanō Jigorō in 1882 it intrinsically harbored strong educational goals that were based on neo-Confucian thought as well as ideas of Western philosophers and educators, including Dewey, Mill, Bentham, and Spencer. To gain a deeper understanding of the educational philosophy and his ideas on self-cultivation during the formative years, I will approach judo from the historical context and the perspective of contemporary educational philosophy. Based on an analysis of contemporaneous primary texts I will pursue the question, what idea of 'man' judo is based and what the goal of self-cultivation in judo training is.

**Keywords:** Kanō Jigorō, Kōdōkan judo, education, ethics, self-cultivation

## Contact

Andreas Niehaus

Ghent University, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Department of Eastern Languages and Cultures  
[andreas.niehaus@ugent.be](mailto:andreas.niehaus@ugent.be)

## 1 Historical Context Meiji period (1868-1912)

Until 1968, Japan was a feudal state with the shogun as the supreme political and military authority. In 1853, under foreign pressure, an intensive process of modernization based on the Western model began in Japan. The feudal form of state and society was replaced by a constitutional monarchy and a (at least theoretically) society without classes. The formal class of warriors lost their privileges but still formed the elite in modern Japan. The transformation of Japan took place at all levels: Military, architecture, jurisprudence, medicine, education, etc. In the first 20 years, the Japanese government invited specialists from different countries to Japan, sent delegations to Western countries, financed longer research stays abroad for "talented" young men, and brought advisors into the country to advise the government and teach at the newly established educational institutions.

Kanō Jigorō (1860-1938) was born at the end of the feudal period and was educated in the traditional as well as modern educational system. His primary education in a temple school was followed by higher education in modern institutions, including the Ikuei Gijuku and Kaisei Gakkō, which would later develop into Tokyo University. Kanō, in 1889, also went to Europe to study Western educational systems. During his professional career, he worked as a teacher at the peers' school (Gakushūin), middle schools, and as director of the Tokyo Higher Normal School. Additionally, he ran several boarding schools, including a school for Chinese exchange students (Kōbun Gakuin), and served in commissions of the Ministry of Education. His profession as an educator and policy maker not only influenced the conceptual development and institutionalization of judo but also gave him the means to significantly influence the development of physical education and sport in Japan during the Meiji and Taishō period (1912-1926) and beyond (see Niehaus 2019).

## 2 General principles of education

Nothing under the sun is greater than education. By educating one person morally and sending him into the society of his generation, we make a contribution extending a hundred generations to come.<sup>1</sup>

The focus in Kanō pedagogy lies on the "acquisition of useful skills." (Kanō, *Jūdō ippan narabi ni*, 104) For Kanō, education, which must include intellect, ethics, and body, has to guide human behavior in all areas of their existence in such a way that it is useful. However, the concept of "usefulness" is not so much directed towards the individual but brings into focus the individual as a being in his or her indissoluble

---

<sup>1</sup> "Kyōiku no koto, tenka ni kore yori eranaru wa nashi, hitori no tokkyō, hiroku mannin ni kuwawari, issei no kaku, tōku hyakusei ni oyobu." Kanō, *Dōtoku no kihon ni tsuite*). Generally, English translations render *tokkyō* "moral education" to "education". Thus omitting a significant part, namely, that education, for Kanō, primarily meant moral education.

connection with family, society, and the nation. Education should prepare children to take on their roles in society, which are assigned to them naturally according to their aptitudes and talents, and thus ultimately pursues the development of society and the nation. This approach firmly bases Kanō's educational philosophy within the utilitarian tradition of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), as well as John Dewey (1859-1952) and Herbert Spencer, which were especially popular in Japan during the second half of the Meiji period.

While Kanō recognized the importance of an even and harmonious formation of intellect, morals, and body, he especially stressed the importance of physical education. He criticized general education in the second half of the Meiji period as a system that only focused on cognitive-intellectual education while neglecting moral education and the development of the body. Kanō accordingly asked for a reform of the educational system by strengthening moral education and physical education in middle schools. By that, he echoes educational politics under minister Mori Arinori (1847-1889), who implemented moral education and "education for the state" (*kokka no tame no kyōiku*) as the main goals of education. Physical education, for Kanō, transcends education as such, as it can realize the development of intellect, morals, and body. From this perspective, physical education had to play a crucial part not only in general education but also in self-cultivation and public health politics.

Kanō, without doubt, was a modern pedagogue, who was familiar with modern pedagogical, political, and economic concepts, but especially the political and social dimensions of physical education in his thought linked to Neo-Confucian concepts of self-cultivation, physicality as well as health discourses, which strongly focus the hierarchical structure of society and on the control of desires. The human being as a physical existence in Neo-Confucianism is integrated into a network that extends from the parental home to the state - whereby the state is the extension of the family. Kanō's approach has a distinct political dimension and political meaning in modern Japan, as Japanese state ideology also speaks of the "body of the state" (*kokutai*). For Kanō the 'veneration of the imperial house and the defense of the national essence' (*kōshitsu sonsū kokutai yōgo*) has to be the goal of moral education in Japanese physical education.

This aspect is also stressed in one of Kanō's early works, the *Seinen shūyō kun* (Teachings in Self-Cultivation for the Youth, 1910), which so far, unfortunately, has not received sufficient scholarly attention. Here he formulates: "The body belongs to us, but at the same time it is also the body of our parents." (Ibid., 60) This idea is a basic concept within Neo-Confucian ideas of self-cultivation and can e.g. be found in Kaibara Ekiken's influential work *Yōjōkun* (1703): Our body has father and mother as the foundation and heaven and earth as the beginning. It does not belong to oneself as we are born and raised by the favor of heaven and earth and through father and mother. Our body is a gift from heaven and earth, a parental

keepsake. One should be prudent and take good care of it to make sure it is not abused and lasts the full span of years with which it is heavenly endowed. This is the very basis of dutifulness to providence and parents. (Kaibara, Yōjōkun, I, 1)

Within this frame, Kanō defines the formation of a strong physical constitution as a ‘natural duty’ and as an obligation towards past, present, and future society/ nation: “We must not judge the strength and health of the body solely from the individual, the parents or the present state. Rather, we have a duty to our past to become physically strong and healthy of our own accord and to pass on a strong as well as healthy seed. It need hardly be said that it is vain to hope that weak ancestors may produce strong offspring. The youth of today are slaves to their base desires. They fall prey to chronic ailments, and their imprudence leads to incurable diseases. The consequences are their own and their family's unhappiness and disloyal subjects of the state. Even more serious is that these young people cannot face their future descendants. A wide variety of unreasonable desires easily arise in youth. It is even more urgent to confront such traitors with courage and to strive to preserve the peace and tranquillity of body and mind. Young people who adopt these premises without fear and put them into practice deserve real respect as dutiful children and good subjects of the state.” (Kanō, *Seinen shūyō kun*, 66)

Kanō could hardly have embedded physical education more clearly within Neo-Confucian philosophy of self-cultivation, in which loyalty and piety formed the foundations of individual moral action; perfectly aligning his ideas of education to the Meiji period hygienic education (hygiene in the broad sense as a daily practice to prevent illness) in the service of the state and the nation. Kanō must be situated within this conservative physical education discourse and still in the 1920's, he favoured gymnastics and athletics above sports that he considered less beneficial for physical education. For Kanō, beyond a purely physical effect, physical education had to serve as the foundation of moral education. The physical constitution of (especially) Japanese men equaled state prosperity, and physical education became a means to guarantee Japan an equal place and sovereignty among civilized nations; a nation which in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - after having been pressured into opening its ports to trade with Western nations and being forced to sign unequal treaties - had started a modernization process to catch up with Western nations (and Western imperialism).

### 3 Education in Early Kōdōkan judo

On May 21, 1889, Kanō publicly introduced judo at the ‘Great Japanese Society for Education’ (*Dai Nihon Kyōikukai*) in the presence of high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Education. This moment was crucial for the institutionalization and success of judo in Japan. Kanō's lecture which was accompanied by a demonstration of judo techniques by children as well as grown-ups not only showed that

judo was designed to be an educational system but also underlined Kanō's claim that judo had to be integrated into the school curriculum. In his lecture, Kanō explained the systematization of judo and identified effects in three areas, which at the same time represent a holistic system of upbringing and education: 1. the judo-system of physical exercise (*jūdō taiiku-hō*), 2. the judo-system of fighting (*jūdō shōbu-hō*), and 3. the judo-system of morality (*jūdō shūshin-hō*). This division shows parallels with Herbert Spencer's approach of an equal 'intellectual, moral and physical education', but also to martial arts' theory in which the tripartite division of the conceptual triad 'heart - technique - body' (*shin - gi - tai*) forms the philosophical as well as the ethical-moral basis of the various martial arts. However, when considering the historical context, it becomes evident that the topics addressed by Kanō mirror and address the critique of a research commission from 1883. In that year the Institute of Gymnastics (*Taisō Denshūjo*), conducted research concerning the suitability of martial arts (*kenjutsu, jūjutsu and iaidō*) for the school curriculum. The commission came to the result of not recommending martial arts for physical education. The negative aspects of these martial arts in the context of physical education were: "1. The development of the body is not even; 2. Exercise is dangerous to a certain degree; 3. Controlling the movements is difficult; therefore the weak and the strong tend to overdo the exercises; 4. The mind will get excited easily and it happens that a rough and wild attitude develops; 5. The wish to fight is fostered, and students tend to want to win no matter what; 6. Stressing competition is harmful, as it easily develops a mind that is only interested in winning; 7. Students have to be supervised individually. It is therefore difficult to teach a class as a group; 8. A lot of space is needed; 9. Although for training jujutsu only a judogi is used, kendo requires further gear. Additionally, it is questionable that students are responsible for the cleanliness of their training clothes and gear." (*Report of the Taisō Denshūjo*, 772, and Bittmann, *Erwin von Baelz*) Kanō in his speech reacted to all these listed shortcomings; knowing perfectly well that he had to distance himself from the traditional jujutsu, which was widely considered to be an anachronism and a physical activity that ran against the idea of *bunmei kaika*, a term that referred to the "civilization and enlightenment" of Japan, coined by the educator and founder of Keio University Fukuzawa Yukichi. Kanō therefore had to establish judo as a modern form of physical education that eliminated the shortcomings of the 'traditional' jujutsu: "I focused on improving jujutsu and have finally developed Kōdōkan judo. After having studied as much as possible about the old jujutsu I took over what had to be preserved and abolished the elements that did not fit. I compared it to scientific methods and formed it in a way to make it fit to our modern society". (Kanō, *Jūdō ippan narabi ni*)

While Kanō was giving his lecture, judoka from different age groups, starting with children from the age of 12, demonstrated judo to show and prove that judo techniques were natural movements, that judo was no health threat, and that it equally developed the athletes' muscles: "When people speak

about jujutsu they think about dangerous techniques, which harm to the body and have no use. But the original jujutsu is not just that. I want the people to understand that what I have developed is not dangerous [...] eight years have passed since I began to teach judo and until today more than 1000 people have entered the Kōdōkan. Every day people train for up to five, or six hours, but no one has had any serious injury until now. [...] This result is better than in apparatus gymnastics or horse riding. Cases of injury only happened, because I didn't have a fixed teaching method in the beginning and because I taught alone and could not keep an eye on everything. [...] As said before, by following the judo system of physical exercises (*jūdō taiiku hō*) injuries are not only avoided, but one will gain many advantages, as one will learn to avoid dangers, if one falls from a car, from a ladder or if one is attacked.” (Kanō, *Jūdō ippan narabi ni*)

Next to his reaction to the physical effects and the usefulness of judo, Kanō further linked judo as moral education to the contemporary situation of the nation, to patriotism and national identity: “Judo is not morality but moral education in the broad sense. Suppose we include judo as subject in the curriculum of our schools throughout the country. In that case, it can certainly compensate for the weak points of our present educational system, support the character formation of our pupils, and strengthen their patriotism. Should we ever have international conflicts, and should we ever be attacked by enemies from all sides, by following the teachings of jūdō, we do not feel fear and will not surrender. And in peaceful times foreigners will admire the development in our country as well as our customs and habits. If we follow the teachings of judo [...] the time in which our country will be one of the strongest civilized countries will be close.” (Kanō, *Jūdō ippan narabi ni*) While Kanō in his 1889 lecture still stressed the usefulness of judo to develop a strong nation and to instill patriotism into the young nation, he - beginning in the 1910s - started to include a more international approach to judo when he started to include his moral principles of self-cultivation, *seiryoku zenyō and jita kyōei*, into the theoretical frame of judo. Finally, he defines these moral principles as being synonymous with judo. Judo therefore develops into an activity that, through individual self-cultivation, aims at creating an ideal society based on the harmonious coexistence of (wo)mankind.

## 4 Maximum Efficiency and Mutual Benefit (*seiryoku zenyō jita kyōei*)

### ***Seiryoku zenyō***

Already during his early career, Kanō searched for a basic moral principle that could serve as a guiding principle in education. He regarded religion, and contemporary educational philosophy, including the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890), as not being suited to provide guiding principles for all aspects of human activities, be they social, political, economic, or physical. His search finally led him to formulate

the moral principles of “maximum efficiency and mutual benefit” (*seiryoku zenyō jita kyōei*). While his early conception of these principles focused on the Japanese nation, a shift towards a more international and holistic vision took place during the Taishō period and parallels the political development in Japan, which for a few years moved in a stream of domestic liberalization and democratization as well as intellectual-ideological diversity. First traces of his universal principles can already be found in the later Meiji period, especially in his book *Seinen shūyō kun*, but it is only during the Taishō period (1912-1927) that a clear concept begins to form. In one of the earliest texts on this topic, Kanō writes: “From the standpoint of the most effective use of mental and physical energy, one must strive to promote good actions (*zenkō*)” (Kanō, *Jūdōkai no jigyō*, 1915, 129) and in a later article he specifies: “One must achieve good results whatever one does. The best way to achieve good results is to use one’s physical and mental strength beneficially without any waste and deviation from the goal.” (Kanō, *Kurubeki heiwa*, 282-287) Thus, only through the union of physical and mental force (intellect and will), can the principle of the most effective use of energy be realized. Force, within this system, does not function as a neutral or purely physical category, but as a moral one.<sup>2</sup> Not the quantity is decisive, but the (moral) quality. “But what is ‘good’? ‘Good’ is what supports the continued development of collective life. Everything that hinders this development is bad. Since ancient times, collective life in our country has been promoted by loyalty to the emperor and love for one’s parents, as well as sincerity. Therefore, these principles are good and anything that opposes them is bad.” (Kanō, *Jūjutsu to jūdō*, 71)

For Kanō, “good” use of energy as an element of individual self-cultivation, implies a deed that is directed towards society. Yet, a certain vagueness is implicit in Kanō’s definition of good within *seiryoku zenyō*, as it lacks an answer to the question of who defines what is good for society. In this sense, Kanō’s moral principle of *seiryoku zenyō* equals an empty container, which can be filled with any ideological content and propaganda; especially as his moral principle seems to be situational and anecdotal rather than categorical and neither considers political dimensions of acting nor political realities and changes. Kanō’s moral principle rather relies on authority and is based on Confucian ethics, focusing on the worship of the emperor as well as on hierarchical social relations. The emperor is, by the state family system, seen as the father of the people to which he expresses his feelings of love and mercifulness (*jinji*). The people then express feelings of love and respect towards their “father”. This relationship of fidelity to the emperor, patriotism, loyalty, and piety towards the sovereign must, Kanō further argues, be the basis of the people’s morality. When Kanō aims to establish *seiryoku zenyō* as a

---

<sup>2</sup> English translations of the term *zenyō* lack the moral component visible in the Japanese word *zen*, which translates: as “good”.

global guiding principle, emperor worship certainly seems to also suggest an imperialistic and expansionist dimension. However, despite his emperor worship, Kanō maintained a critical stance in the 1930s and condemned the imperialist policies of his time. He strongly criticized Japan's aggression towards China and invasion of Manchuria in 1931 as well as Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933. Already in 1912, he remarked on armament: "We are in a period of armament and intimidation. That must stop. One should stop armament, when adequate defense has been obtained [...] If one arms oneself too much, distrust between the nations will increase. That is, why the spirit of the time asks for disarmament." (Kanō, *Gunshuku to taiiku*, 1912, 17) In his 1932 speech at the University of Southern California, he openly criticized the Japanese government: "Is it not because of this principle of mutual welfare and benefit has been recognized that we came to form the League of Nations and the Great Powers of the world came to meet for the decrease of naval and military armaments? These movements are also automatic acknowledgments of the crying need for efficiency and mutual welfare and benefit." (Pamphlet, speech given by Kanō Jigorō at the University of Southern California in 1932, p. 8.) By 1933, however, Japan left the League of Nations – symbolically ending a period of internationalism during the 1920s.

### ***Jita kyōei***

During the early 1910s, Kanō became increasingly dissatisfied with his earlier approach to moral education. He realized that it didn't sufficiently consider development and change in an increasingly globalizing world. He, therefore, began to further develop his moral principles towards a universalistic claim, which is then formulated as *jita kyōei*: generally translated as "mutual welfare and benefit". Already in *Yūkō no katsudō*, a magazine Kanō had founded in 1919, he wrote: "Lately, I defend the idea, that human deeds must entirely follow the criteria of self-perfection and benefit of the world. To put it differently, I believe that one must follow the principle of the co-existence of the self and the other (*jita heiritsu shugi*)." (Kanō, *Ima no Nihon shakai*, 289-290) Kanō saw human beings as social beings that can only exist and develop within the context of society; the Japanese term *ningen* 'human being' literally means "being in-between humans." Self-discipline in self-cultivation is the means to reach this state of perfection. Control of one's individual needs consequently is the main goal of moral education: "It is the power of education to unite one's needs with morality (*dōtoku*)." (Kanō, *Seiryoku zenyō jita kyōei*, 70-75). An individual who has reached that state of perfection, is characterized by the faculty of judgment, moral and intellectual strength, as well as the ability to recognize and enjoy the beauty of nature, paintings, sculptures, and music. This state of contentment, referred to as "happiness," or "flourishing," marks a state of perfection of the self, which is defined as "the state of greatest possible physical and mental development of the individual in the society in which he presently lives,

and the highest material and immaterial power attained thereby.” (Kanō, *Kojin no kansei*, 295) On the level of the Japanese nation, a state of perfection reflects civilizational development and translates into the respect and esteem of other nations. (Kanō, *Jita kyōei ni taisuru*, 21-22) The idea of cooperation and the development of mankind or a global community is certainly an idea that can be found within the theories of different thinkers around the world at that time. Kanō especially was influenced by John Dewey’s “mutual assistance”, which he had elaborated on in *The School and Society* from 1899 (translated into Japanese in 1901). After Kanō was elected to be the first Asian member of the IOC in 1909, the internationalism within the Olympic movement and the writings of Pierre de Coubertin’s, and his idea of *respect mutuel* also influenced Kanō’s thinking profoundly. Kanō was a staunch supporter of the Olympic movement and Olympism and was convinced that the Olympic Games could give participating athletes and nations the feeling of being part of a global community acting in concert. At the same time, for him, and for Coubertin, athletic competitions on an international level offered opportunities to strengthen national identities.

## 5 Conclusion

Kanō’s educational philosophy and his concept of self-cultivation are highly influenced by Neo-Confucianism, utilitarianism, and pragmatism. Self-cultivation is defined as a duty and is - based on the ethical principles of *seiryoku zenyō* - ultimately directed toward the prosperity of society on a national as well as international level. Even if Kanō must be characterized as a conservative and patriotic thinker, he was certainly not a (ultra)nationalist thinker. His patriotism runs parallel to a political development that demanded more sovereignty and an equal position among the modern nations for the Japanese state. Kanō supported the development of a strong army in Japan, and he supported the militarization of the Japanese school system and saw pre-military and paramilitary training as a prerequisite for a strong army, which in turn guaranteed Japan’s sovereignty; echoing the Meiji period’s political slogan of *fukoku kyōhei*: “rich country, strong army”. For Kanō, the basis of equality between nations was deterrence. However, as in Europe, the search for national identity and self-confidence – unfortunately – fuelled radical nationalism and imperialism. This step Kanō did not follow, and his later writings show that internationalism remains a strong focus in his thinking.

## References

- Bittmann, H. (2010). *Erwin von Baelz und die körperlichen Übungen. Leibeserziehung und traditionelle Kampfkünste im Japan der Meiji-Zeit*. Verlag Heiko Bittmann.
- Niehaus A, & Braun J. (Eds.). (2010). *Regeln Zur Lebenspflege (Yōjōkun): Kaibara Ekiken (1630-1714)*. Iudicium.
- Kanō, J. (1923). Dōtoku no kihon ni tsuite. Chūtō Kyōiku, 46. In Kōdōkan (Eds.). (1988). *Kanō Jigorō Taikei 4* (pp. 302–309). Hon no Tomosha 1988.
- Kanō, J. (1912). Gunshuku to taiiku. *Taiiku to kyōgi*, 1(1).

- Kanō, J. (1936). Jūjutsu to jūdō to no kubetsu wo meikaku ni seyo. *Jūdō*, 7(2). In Kōdōkan (Eds.). (1988). *Kanō Jigorō Taikei 1* (pp. 70–72). Hon no Tomosha.
- Kanō, J. (1925). Jita kyōei ni taisuru shuju no shitsumon ni tsuite. *Sakkō*, 4(5). In Kōdōkan (Eds.). (1988). *Kanō Jigorō Taikei 9* (pp. 21–26). Hon no Tomosha.
- Kanō, J. (1915). Jūdōkai no jigyo. *Jūdō*, 1(5). In Kōdōkan (Eds.). (1988). *Kanō Jigorō Taikei 1* (pp. 124–132). Hon no Tomosha.
- Kanō, J. (1922). Kojin no kansei. *Taisei*, 1(2). In Kōdōkan (Eds.). (1988). *Kanō Jigorō Taikei 4* (pp. 294–301). Hon no Tomosha.
- Kanō, J. (1919). Kurubeki heiwa kokufuku no yo wo mukaete. *Yūkō no katsudō*, 5(1). In Kōdōkan (Eds.). (1988). *Kanō Jigorō Taikei 6* (pp. 282–287). Hon no Tomosha.
- Kanō, J. (1921). Ima Nihon shakai ni oite Kōdōkan no shugyōsha ga yū suru gimū ni tsuite. *Yūkō no katsudō*, 7(6). In Kōdōkan (Eds.). (1988). *Kanō Jigorō Taikei 1* (pp. 286–292). Hon no Tomosha.
- Kanō, J. (1926). Seiryoku zen'yō jita kyōei ni kansuru shitsumon ni kotau. *Sakkō*, 5(6). In Kōdōkan (Eds.). (1988). *Kanō Jigorō Taikei 9* (pp. 70–75). Hon no Tomosha.
- Kanō, J. (1932). Pamphlet, Speech given at the University of Southern California.
- Kanō, J. (1889). *Jūdō ippan narabi ni sono kyōikuy jō no kachi*. In Kōdōkan (Eds.). (1988). *Kanō Jigorō Taikei 2* (pp. 88–135). Hon no Tomosha.
- Kanō, J. (1910). *Seinen shūyō kun*. Dōbunkan. In Kōdōkan (Eds.). (1988). *Kanō Jigorō Taikei 7*. Hon no Tomosha.
- Niehaus, A. (2019). *Leben und Werk Kanō Jigorōs (1860-1938)*. *Judo – Sport – Erziehung*. Ergon/ Nomos.
- Report of the Taisō Denshūjo. In Watanabe, Ichirō (Ed.). *Shiryō Meiji Budo-shi* (p. 772). Shinjinbutsu ōrai 1971.