

# **What is Traditional Jujutsu?**

Origins, Derivations and Modern Applications

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*"The sword was to be far more than a simple weapon; it had to be an answer to life's questions"*

Musashi - Eiji Yoshikawa

The literature (Cunningham, 1996; Draeger, 1973, 1974; Mol, 2001) suggests that for a system to be considered "traditional" it must originate, derive or be embedded in one of the following three categories below:

## **Group (I): Pure Traditional Systems (Bujutsu Systems)**

Pure Traditional Systems trace their origins in Japan as far back as the 9th or 10th centuries but did not begin to take systematized form until the 15th or 16th centuries. Included among the earliest systems are Daito Ryu, Takenouchi Ryu, Tagaki Ryu, Tenjin Shinyo Ryu, Kito Ryu, Sekiguchi Ryu, Seigo Ryu and Yoshin Ryu, among others. These systems are considered forms of Bujutsu (warrior arts) and their primary emphasis was the training of samurai for combat, especially in close quarter situations. While most such systems often included a code of ethics (Bushido), and stressed the development of both internal and external sources of power, their primary focus was, nevertheless, the training of warriors for combat and defense.

## **Group (II): Traditional Systems with Hybrid Branches or Derivations**

### **(Bujutsu or Budo Systems)**

This category includes Pure Classical Systems which underwent various branching and variations/distillations immediately prior to, or soon after the 1868 Meiji Restoration period (which saw the end of the Samurai Era). One example is Tagaki Ryu which

branched into Kukishin Ryu and Hontai Yoshin Ryu. Thus, included in this category are examples of Classical Hybrid Systems that underwent further development in the pre Meiji Period as well as the "modern" era (post 1868). Several such systems gradually transformed themselves from bujutsu into budo systems while still retaining their original names. Others underwent radical transformations and adopted, or invented new names which reflected the broader goals of their "evolved" art form.

### **Group III: Modern Era (Post Meiji) Traditionally-Based Budo Systems**

Modern era traditionally-based systems were introduced or developed mostly after 1868. Such systems are anchored or have strong ties and links to one or more classical systems and traditions (or classical hybrid systems) through philosophy, principles, etiquette, dress, goals, Japanese terminology, methods of training and dojo practices. Traditional judo (not Olympic or modern competitive judo) can be described as a classically-based modern era (post Meiji) hybrid martial art whose origins are primarily Kito Ryu and Tenjin Shinyo Ryu Jujutsu. Ueshiba's aikido (which derives mostly from Daito Ryu Aiki Jujutsu) is another such example. We would also add in this group various Western modern (gendai) jujutsu systems that attempt to adhere faithfully to various classical traditions and hybrid forms.

While the primary focus of all pre and post Meiji jujutsu systems is combat and defense (no rules), systems that espoused the broader goals of budo also placed a greater emphasis on the development of a *martial culture*<sup>1</sup> that goes beyond combat and defense. Such a culture includes an emphasis on philosophy, moral and technical principles, Japanese terminology, personal growth and development and traditional ways and practices. Thus, many of the original traditional combat and defense bujutsu systems were gradually infused with a martial culture which stressed a broader array of goals, ways and practices. Further, because of the mostly deadly nature of the techniques contained in such systems no sport competition was possible, nor was it encouraged in traditional systems. However, some of today's traditionally-based systems sometimes include sport competition, but in a greatly modified form; a form which excludes all the lethal and extremely dangerous techniques of traditional systems. It must be stressed, however, that for traditional (or traditionally based) systems that today engage in sport competition *this is a secondary area of emphasis*. Systems for whom sport competition has become a primary emphasis are not considered traditional martial arts, but martial sports (as is the case with various Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu systems). We need to stress, however, that such sport systems are not to be confused with traditional jujutsu arts unless they also incorporate the "martial culture" of the system(s) of origin. Of course many such sport systems have distanced themselves from their root arts but this does not make such sport systems less valuable or worthy of study. On the contrary, they are designed to attain specific objectives and address specific goals such as the development of competitors, the provision of entertainment (as in Cage Fighting) and the like. These are valuable sport forms and serve important needs for society.

Finally, jujitsu (note spelling) for sport and competition has clearly defined short term practical purposes. In sport jujitsu the training period and competitive life of the athlete may last just a few years, after which most quit either because of injuries, aging or because they can no longer hold their own in the arena. Either way the path is a very short one, the goals are practical (e.g., competition for medals and trophies) and narrowly defined.

Traditional systems, on the other hand, in addition to their combat and defense emphasis, are seen as lifelong paths of study whose goals go well beyond combative, sport or self defense applications. Such paths stress personal growth, the development of insights and understandings, the activation of inner sources of power (e.g., Ki), the development of self discipline, control, honor, loyalty, and the perfection of character. That is, they are true budo systems.

Below, we list EIGHT major defining characteristics of traditional jujutsu systems:

### Eight Major Characteristics of Traditional, or Traditionlly-Based Systems

1. They fall under one of the three categories stated earlier in this paper. That is, they are pure traditional systems, or they are traditional hybrids, or they are traditionally based.
2. They have clear or at least identifiable lineages and headmasters.
3. They possess a history and traditions. These include the use of Japanese terminology. Practitioners of traditional systems practice in what they call dojos, not gyms or studios; teachers in traditional systems are called Sensei, not Coach; techniques are referred to by their names in Japanese to maintain and convey as much of the original intent as possible. This may also include such details as the spelling<sup>2</sup> of their systems with a "u", not an "i" as in "jujutsu" and not jujitsu, ju-jitsu or jiu-jitsu. In fact, today the majority of true traditional, or traditionally-based systems spell their name with a "u" and this is also seen in other arts such as bujutsu, kenjutsu, bojutsu, ninjutsu and taijutsu, among others.
4. Traditional systems have a clearly defined philosophy, dojo practices and etiquette. For example, jujutsuka in such systems dress in a manner that reflects their Japanese origins and/or traditions (no fancy patches or advertising logos on their gis, and for males, the wearing of t-shirts under the gi is not permitted). Jujutsuka in traditional systems may wear one or two patches (and some systems have no patches at all) that help identify their system/organization. They may also display a Menkyo (teaching license) patch. Traditional jujutsuka always wear zori to and from the mat out of respect for the practice area and for their fellow practitioners.
5. They often include meditation and employ traditional principles in the practice and execution of techniques and strategies,including the study of kata.
6. They promote and license their jujutsuka in a manner consistent with their origins and/or traditions. That is, some employ the Renshi, Kyoshi or Hanshi system in combination with or without *modern*<sup>3</sup> conventional ranking systems (kyu and dan grades); others also license their practitioners using the Menkyo System in combination with modern conventional ranking.
7. Traditional systems typically have a theoretical/philosophical/technical content that is contained in a catalogue (mokuroku) and/or curriculum that is conveyed to students and practitioners through a recognizable structure such as kata, oral traditions, and/or specific writings (densho). Such a curriculum in modern day classically-based systems must reflect its connection to a system's classical roots. In the modern era we of course no longer employ scrolls unless we practice one of the original pre-Meiji Classical Ryuha

(or their classically-derived hybrids) which have been handed down in their original form from one Soke to another. Instead, these essential teachings may be located on websites, in books and in various other data storage and retrieval formats.

8. Traditional systems serve as lifelong paths that, in addition to combative skills and strategies, stress higher goals and values (e.g., honor, rectitude, loyalty and the perfection of character) and aim to take the student beyond the skills and techniques of fighting. The long term goals of such lifelong paths require, therefore, a long term commitment to the art, and its ways and practices. Typically, practitioners of traditional systems stay in the art for most of their lives while most competitors in sport jujitsu (as is also the case with modern sport judo) often quit when they are no longer able to compete.

We should point out, however, that with a number of gendai (modern) systems that saw their inception in the 1920s and 1930s, there are several (e.g., Danzan Ryu Jujitsu) that spell their name with an "i" and not a "u". While the kanji characters are the same for those who spell their systems with a "u" or an "i" it is important to understand that when Japanese Martial Arts were introduced to the West no standardization existed on the English spelling of Japanese characters. Thus, English speakers in the early 1900s did their best to approximate in English what they thought sounded closest to the Japanese pronunciation of the term. And, to their ears, jujutsu sounded more like jujitsu or jiu jitsu. Interestingly, even native Japanese jujutsuka who came to the West in the early 1900s adopted early anglicized (romanized) spellings, probably to "fit in" with the ways of the English speaking world they found themselves in. Most of them spoke hardly any English so their efforts to "not be disrespectful" of the ways of the West are perfectly understandable. Thus, even they adopted early westernized forms of the spelling that include jujitsu, ju-jitsu or jiu-jitsu. Such variations in spelling have now become part of the history and traditions of several gendai systems so we must look more closely at what they do to determine whether they are in fact traditional, traditionally-based or Western sport forms.

Today, Japanese terms have been officially standardized (since the early 1950s) into a system called Romaji, the romanization of the Japanese language, and systems have been developed by Henshall (1988), Nelson (2007) and Hepburn (1887) that clearly define how Japanese Kanji is to be represented in English.

Interestingly, in Romaji jutsu means "art" or "craft" while jitsu is defined as "truth" or "reality". Thus, according to Romaji those of us who practice "the flexible art" are engaging in jujutsu while those engaging in "the flexible truth or reality" are involved in jujitsu! We also note that the Kodokan has adopted the Romaji System which spells jujutsu with a "u" as in "Kodokan Goshin Jutsu".

In summary, it should be noted that systems which have distanced themselves from their Japanese roots (that is they have become Westernized) have several features that help distinguish them. These often are:

- (i) The use of English terminology for the names of techniques, ways and practices
- (ii) Failure to adhere to common Japanese dojo practices by wearing t-shirts under the gi while on the mat; failure to wear zori from the dressing room to the mat; failing to bow when stepping on and off the mat; failing to wear a gi while training, and so on

(iii) The focus of teaching and practice is today on sport competition skills and strategies  
(iv) The current Soke (if such a term is ever used in Westernized systems) is often identified as the Western "founder" of the system without any reference to the original Japanese founder, or Japanese roots of the art. One such example is Gracie Jiu Jitsu which claims to have originated in Brazil. Those who know their history are, however, quite aware of the fact that Kimura and Maeda were the major influential figures in the development of the Brazilian version of the art, which actually originated from the NeWaza of Traditional Kodokan Judo. In fact, today's Brazilian Jiu Jitsu can best be described as a hybrid art that reflects mostly the groundwork of early Kodokan Judo, together with early Judo joint locking techniques which, regrettably, have been mostly eliminated in today's Olympic Judo  
(v) Modern systems of jujitsu/ju jitsu/jiu jitsu have generally discarded the practice of kata from their training  
(vi) Modern systems of jujitsu/jiu jitsu/ju jitsu also appear to have abandoned the higher goals of traditional budo systems, the perfection of character and the development of inner sources of power

### Summary & Conclusions

Our investigation and analysis suggest that traditional, or traditionally-based systems possess several defining characteristics. These are:

1. They fall under one of the three categories identified earlier in this paper. That is, they are pure traditional systems, or they are traditional hybrids, or they are traditionally based.
2. Their primary emphasis is the teaching of skills and strategies that are appropriate for combat and self defense (no rules). If they also engage in sport competition this is a minor or secondary area.
3. They are embedded in a martial culture that includes traditional ways and practices, a moral philosophy and history, use of Japanese terminology, dojo etiquette, dress and conduct. They also spell<sup>3</sup> jujutsu with a "u", not an "i" (unlike modern sport forms that often spell the term as jujitsu, ju-jitsu or jiu-jitsu, among others). Teachers are referred to as sensei, not coach, and the practice of the art is conducted in dojos, not studios or gyms.
4. They employ mostly traditional principles in the teaching, practice and execution of techniques and strategies.
5. Traditional systems possess a lineage of Headmasters, or Soke, through whom the system's Densho and Mokuroku are passed on to the next generation (in scrolls, orally or through kata).
6. They promote/license their students and instructors using mostly traditional criteria, often in combination with more modern kyu/dan grades.
7. Unlike sports and their rather short lifespan traditional budo systems serve as lifelong paths of study, reflection and self discovery.

## 8. Traditional systems possess a theoretical/philosophical/moral grounding that aim to take the student beyond the skills of combat and toward "the perfection of character".

1 "Martial culture" speaks to the history, philosophy, principles, traditions and cultural ways and practices that a jujutsu system is grounded in

2 It should be noted that pre-Meiji systems did not use the modern ranking system of kyu and dan grades

3 For a thorough analysis of the correct spelling of jujutsu please consult:

<http://www.shorinjikempo-oviedo.es/content/view/49/49/> (in Spanish). There is a version in English which I will post at a later date

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