



JAPANFOUNDATION

# THE JAPAN FOUNDATION NEWSLETTER

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*If the late autumn rain  
continues falling endlessly,  
my cottage will be buried  
in a myriad  
of autumn leaves.*

時雨の雨間なくし降れば我が宿は  
千々の木のはにうづもれぬらん

Ryokan

(1758-1831)

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The Editor  
The Japan Foundation Newsletter  
Information and Resource Center  
The Japan Foundation  
ARK Mori Bldg. 21F  
1-12-32 Akasaka, Minato-ku  
Tokyo 107-6021, Japan  
Tel: +81 (03)5562-3538  
Fax: +81 (03)5562-3534  
E-mail: [jfnl@jpf.go.jp](mailto:jfnl@jpf.go.jp)  
<http://www.jpf.go.jp/>

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## Interview with

# Mr. Yasuhiro Yamashita (Judoist, Olympic Gold Medalist)

## Judo as a Path to Social Good

Judo was developed over a hundred years ago, based on ancient Japanese martial arts. Today, its worldwide popularity is due to its dynamic physicality as well as its intellectual and spiritual depth. The Japan Foundation interviewed Olympic gold medalist Yasuhiro Yamashita, commissioner of the IJF (International Judo Federation), which is comprised of 187 national federations with over ten million members worldwide. Mr. Yamashita is also a professor at Tokai University, and has taught judo in many countries around the world, emphasizing the importance of international exchange through the sport. He talked about the past, present and future of judo following a martial arts exhibition in Vladivostok, Russia, co-organized by The Japan Foundation.



*"My motto is to be someone who can  
always connect with others fairly."*

(At Tokai University, Kanagawa)

**JF:** First of all, please tell us about the martial arts exhibition in Vladivostok. What was it like?

**Yamashita:** It was wonderful. Eighty instructors and practitioners of judo, kendo, aikido, *naginata*, *iaido*, and karate from Tokai University and the International Budo University went to Vladivostok on a ship owned by Tokai University. Actually, it was my first experience to travel to a foreign country by ship. When we arrived at the port, I was so surprised to find almost three hundred people already there, just waiting for us. Then, the welcoming ceremony including speeches, a concert by the local chorus group, and a traditional dance performance began. We understood immediately how welcome we were. As a result, the mood of the exhibition, which was only two days long, was really high. The first day, I presented a lecture on the spirit of judo, the purpose of judo, and my personal relationship to Russia. The second day, we held the main exhibition of martial art demonstrations and the non-competitive judo and kendo matches. In addition to the exhibition, I held a day-long seminar on judo for the local practitioners and instructors. There were over a hundred male and female instructors and practitioners there children and adults. I could feel their strong passion for judo. My experience of teaching judo in many countries has shown me that whenever we put on our judo jackets, we are friends with the same goal, who can understand each other beyond differences in language and

*Yasuhiro Yamashita is the Education and Coaching Director of the International Judo Federation and a professor at Tokai University. A gold medalist at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, Mr. Yamashita was champion of the World Judo Championships in 1979, 1981, and 1983. He was also champion of the All-Japan Judo Championships from 1977 to 1985.*

customs. That is the great thing about judo, and sports in general.

**JF:** Do you think you left as strong an impression on the people of Vladivostok as they left on you?

**Yamashita:** Yes, I think so. Actually, after coming back from Vladivostok, the president of Tokai University received a thank-you letter from the Vladivostok Judo Association. They asked us to send an instructor there for one or two years, and also asked if it was also possible to send volunteer judo students over there during school break. That letter was clear evidence of the strong impression our activities had on the people of Vladivostok, but we should make it clear that this was not our intention. The exhibition was held as part of the memorial events for the 150th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Russia. More importantly, based on the success of this endeavor, we should continue to develop and enhance our relationship and exchange with the people of Vladivostok and Russia through martial arts and judo.

#### “When We Put on Our Judo Jackets, We’re All The Same”

**JF:** When you teach judo abroad, what is your main focus?

**Yamashita:** I keep reminding myself that although I am teaching judo, what I am really teaching is cultural exchange. In other words, first I abandon the arrogant attitude of “I’m taking the trouble to come here all the way from Japan to teach judo,” and make an effort to understand the local culture and customs. Then, I teach the students about my culture. I believe this process leads to mutual understanding. So, I always tell myself, “What I am teaching is not just the technique of judo.” Through the judo techniques I’ve learned, I teach them the spirit of judo, the educational aspects of judo, and finally, the culture and beliefs of Japan. A relationship established through this process is not limited to just those interested in judo. I encounter people in many other fields. And this personal relationship of trust builds a bridge between Japan and foreign countries. To me, that is international exchange through judo. It’s inappropriate to look down on others because you’re an instructor. I’ve seen Japanese who take this attitude towards local people when they travel in Asia or visit less developed countries. I believe this attitude is wrong.

**JF:** So, you always try to approach others as an equal.

**Yamashita:** Yes. There are so many small, less developed countries in the world. The people in those countries often put up with this type of arrogance from foreigners without complaint or anger, but inside, they have a sense of pride about their own nationalities and cultures. So, people who are in a position to support foreign countries should make an effort to stand as equals. This attitude makes the local people really happy. My motto is to be someone who can always connect



Martial Arts Exhibition in Vladivostok, Russia (Left is Mr. Yamashita)  
© Tokai University

with others fairly. When we put on our judo jackets and stand on the *tatami*, we’re all the same. When I instruct judo abroad, 99% is teaching the students, but the remaining percent is *being taught* by them. I want to keep an open attitude towards learning together, making a mutual effort, and having a good time training together.

#### Winning and the Art of Self-Discovery

**JF:** How did you first encounter judo?

**Yamashita:** I started to practice judo when I was ten years old. The truth is, when I was in elementary school, I was a pretty unruly boy. I caused a lot of trouble to my classmates. When I was in the first grade of elementary school, I was as big as a twelve-year-old. I guess I really didn’t know how to use my energy in the right way at that time. So, my parents, who worried about my future, decided to send me to the judo dojo in my neighborhood. They thought judo training would discipline my mind, and that I would develop better manners. And then, when I got to junior high, I met a great judo teacher. He taught me that the purpose of judo was not just to gain physical strength or master certain skills, but also to build a strong and fair spirit. He taught me the way to live. That changed my life.

**JF:** You have had an incredible career. You were a gold medalist at the Los Angeles Olympics and nine-year consecutive winner of the All-Japan Judo Championships, and you had 203 straight victories in matches spanning from 1977 to your retirement. Did you ever feel any pressure to keep on winning?

**Yamashita:** Of course, I always had that kind of pressure, but it was not that difficult for me to handle, because if I had not wanted to win, I would have stopped doing judo. The issue was whether I wanted to chase my dream or not. That’s all. My dream was to be an Olympic gold medalist in judo. And I trained very hard not to live up to other people’s expectations, but to realize my own dream. If I had done it just to live up to other

people’s expectations, the pressure would have been too much for me. Of course, somehow in my own mind, I was proud to have met people’s expectations, and that encouraged me. But more than that, I had a stronger motive to realize my own dream and to reach my personal goal. So, I didn’t feel as much pressure as people might have imagined.



Professor Jigoro Kano (1860–1938)  
Founder of Judo  
©The Kodokan Judo Institute

#### Judo as an International Sport

**JF:** Judo is now a truly international sport, even an Olympic event. In the process of modernization, has it retained a sense of *budo* (traditional Japanese martial arts)?

**Yamashita:** There are many ways of understanding and approaching judo. Some people may work hard at judo as a sport, while others might devote themselves to judo with the feeling that it is *budo*. There are some people who do judo for their health, while others practice it for self-defense. In my case, I look at judo as a sport. However, it is different from other sports, in that it has both a high educational value and the element of *budo*, through which people can learn the spirit of Japan. In 1882, professor Jigoro Kano established Kodokan Judo by combining the skills he’d learned through various schools of *jujutsu*. He mastered Tenshin Shinyo and Kito school *jujutsu* when he was a student at the University of Tokyo, but in establishing Kodokan Judo, he left out some of the more dangerous *jujutsu* skills and emphasized physical education, through which people could strengthen the whole body. Professor Kano named the first judo dojo “Kodokan” (講道館), which means “the house of study of the way (道)” and created the name judo (柔道). So from its beginnings, judo contained the philosophy of “the way,” or *michi* (道). This philosophy puts great value on building a healthy body and soul, for the good of society. In this sense, the birth of judo was a turning point. Before judo arose, the term *jutsu* (術), or skill, was used in naming traditional Japanese martial arts, like *kenjutsu* or *jujutsu*. Then, martial arts changed their names to kendo, aikido, and karatedo, incorporating the concept of *do*; the way one should comport one’s life, rather than *jutsu*, or “skill.”

**JF:** In 1974, the International Judo Federation changed the system of judging judo matches. In 1974, partial scores such as *yuko* (almost *waza-ari*) and *koka* (almost *yuko*), and par-



Eishoji Temple. The first judo dojo, “Kodokan,” was located inside the temple.  
©The Kodokan Judo Institute

tial penalties such as *shido* (slight penalty), *chui* (serious penalty) and *keikoku* (grave penalty) were added to the previous scoring categories of *ippon* (full point) and *waza-ari* (almost *ippon*). This allowed referees and spectators alike to follow the decision-making process as it occurred, but some people criticized the new system, saying that some foreigners misused the partial scores and penalties to their advantage. Do you agree?

**Yamashita:** I think these opinions are off-point. If you look at international judo tournaments such as the Olympics, you’ll quickly realize that this is not the case. Many more international tournaments are won by *ippon* (full points) than national tournaments in Japan. Also, most champions, regardless of nationality, win by *ippon*. I think that kind of criticism arose when the Japanese judo competitors lost in international tournaments. It was an excuse made by the Japanese judo competitors, or by the media. In the old system, the only scores were *ippon* and *waza-ari*, and the referees judged the winners subjectively. But now we have a fairer and more objective referee system, due to partial scores and the addition of penalties such as *yuko*, *koka*, *shido*, *chui*, and *keikoku*. If judo continues to develop internationally, we should make a great effort to innovate the sport and make it even more dynamic, so that people who would not normally come to a judo match will want to come. This is also my mission as the Education and Coaching Director of the IJF.

**JF:** If you could summarize the spirit of judo in one phrase, what would it be?

**Yamashita:** *Wa* (和), or harmony. Because I can only do judo when there is an opponent who spars with me. Professor Kano’s words 精力善用 自他共栄 (utilize your energy well to nourish yourself and others) is one of my favorite sayings. Of course, I’m not denying the importance of winning tournaments such as the Olympics, because I myself competed to win. But I want people to understand that judo can play other important roles in making a contribution to society and furthering international exchange. So, I’ll keep doing what I do to share the richness of judo with people all over the world.