

KATSU REVIVAL TECHNIQUES

One day fifty years ago after I had started training at the London Budokai and shortly after I had got my black belt Trevor Leggett 6th Dan announced, “All new black belts down to the lower dojo”. This meant nothing to me but some of the older hands looked at each other apprehensively and one whispered to me, ‘It’s a katsu class.’ I had heard about the judo revival techniques but never thought I would see them in action let alone do them.

We crowded into the small lower dojo and Leggett made a point of shutting the dojo door firmly. ‘What I have to show you is part of the Budokwai oral traditions. That is to say it is passed on verbally from black belt to black and is never shown to anyone who is not a club black belt. Never’. He went on, ‘I will show you two katsu techniques – another name is kappo - and after you have practised them a bit with a partner we will do the real thing. In other words you will be paired up and will strangle your partner out then revive him and then he will do the same to you’. We looked at each other.

Leggett then showed us the two techniques which we practised with our partners for about twenty minutes. These dry-runs were not particularly spectacular. Nothing much happened mainly because we were all fully conscious. Leggett came round to each couple and checked out their katsu technique. The mood of the class was apprehensive.

Leggett then clapped his hands which made some of us jump and picked the first couple. The couple he chose were two new black-belts who like me had never experienced a katsu class before ‘I want one of you to put kata-hajime on your partner and strangle him out. The kata-hajime correctly applied is very difficult to break that is why we use it. Also it shows the degree of unconsciousness which has been reached. One of you sit down and let the other approach you from the rear and apply Kata-hajime. You go first’. He nodded towards one of them who was called Tony.

Tony moved round behind his seated partner, put his hands in place and began applying pressure around his neck. Leggett however had noticed a fault. ‘Stop, stop.’ He wagged his finger at the stranglee. ‘Let him put it on you. Don’t tense your neck up before the strangle is fully in place. Start again!’ The next attempt was much cleaner. The strangle began to bite immediately and in a few seconds the stranglee got closer to being strangled out. At this point he began thrashing about wildly trying to tear his partners hands away from his neck. ‘Keep it on.’ said Leggett sternly and Tony did so. A few more seconds then his partner slumped unconscious in front of him. ‘Now move quickly and do the first katsu method. Your partner will revive quite quickly so move it’. The katsu was applied but nothing much happened. The inert heap stayed inert. ‘Now try the second method.’ At this point there were signs of returning life and then Tony’s partner woke up. ‘Too late, said Leggett, but not to worry, and don’t forget that if the strangle is held on for longer your partner will stay unconscious for longer. If held on for too long death will occur.’ Leggett moved on to the next couple since the somewhat dazed man was not yet capable of applying the same medicine to his partner. “It will be your turn to strangle second time around,” said Leggett.

‘Your turn’, said Leggett cheerfully to the next couple. This time there was much less resistance from the one being strangled but it looked a lot more disturbing. As he dropped unconscious his legs and body began shaking in fits and spasms. ‘Do the second revival technique I taught you’, commanded Leggett, ‘but quickly, he will revive soon’. The second katsu move was a lot more difficult to do but it appeared to have some effect. The body jerked in a more positive way and with a big gasp he came to. ‘That was better, said Leggett, but remember these techniques have to be practised’.

The next couple was even more dramatic. The strangle was applied and his partner duly slumped unconscious except that he was pretending to go out. ‘Start again, bellowed Leggett, and this time properly’. The stranglee was scared stiff of the strangle but now that his pretence had been exposed he had to let it go on correctly and Leggett told his strangler to hold it on till he said stop. Up to the point of going out he fought like a tiger but it was no accident that katahajime was chosen – he could not break it. He slumped unconscious but was out long enough to let his partner have a few stabs at both katsu methods. One seemed to work quite well.

The next couple to perform was noteworthy for one single reason. Once consciousness was lost the stranglee peed in his pants which had to be cleaned up. While this was going on Leggett asked the class how they knew the strangle was genuinely taking effect. Various explanations were offered but they were not the ones Leggett wanted. ‘Its quite simple he said. Once in the Katahajime position one arm will be sticking up in the air. Be aware of that arm. When it slowly starts to droop you will know it is working

My turn came around. I put the strangle on but my partner soon started double tapping me in submission. Leggett though said, ‘Keep going’ which I did but it felt strange to go through the taps till my partner slumped unconscious. I had time to apply both methods but nothing startling happened. He came round of his own accord.

After me Leggett went back to the first couple and reversed the roles. By now the mood had changed for the worse. We had all seen the fits, spasms, deception, peeing and gagging and none of it looked inviting. The similar problems happened again. Some fought like tigers to break the strangle and others pretended to go out. In my case it was not too bad. I had been strangled out accidentally a few times in training since I always fought to the bitter end but it felt weird to allow someone to do it.

However we all managed to see some successes with the second of the Katsu methods which involved jabbing a particular nerve in the body. One thing we did learn and that was how long it took to strangle somebody out. Unfortunately for anybody reading this I am not about to expose the secret oral katsu traditions of the Budokwai. As far as I know the katsu class was only repeated a few more times (which I attended) and then never again after Leggett retired from judo.

However as judo teachers and referees we had plenty of opportunity to practise our katsu skills. The most spectacular success I had was when a grading competitor had dropped unconscious very early on during groundwork and the referee had not noticed it. I shouted to him, he looked at the strangle and shook his head but did not stop the fight. It began to look very dangerous to me so I dived across the mat and knocked the

strangler out of the way and got working quickly with the katsu. By this stage the man underneath appeared to have stopped breathing. I applied the katsu but nothing happened then on the fourth attempt he gave a big shudder and took a huge gulp of air and soon came to.

In Japan things were a bit different. One frequently saw unconscious students dragged to the edge of the mat and then revived with a kick to the body (to a katsu spot) and then after five to ten minutes they were expected to get back into the training. Most, though not all, did. In the Nichidai dojo the sempai used to say that you saw your mum in your unconscious dreams and they would often use the expression, 'Send him home to mum' when meaning, 'Strangle him out!' This was the medicine for those who did not fight against the strangle hard enough, especially those on with a foreigner.

In the Kodokan big dojo there were always plenty of old sensei who flocked to any injury on the mat. They were good for minor dislocations and breaks but whereas some seemed to know what they were doing others did not exactly inspire much confidence. One American judoka I knew had his nose twisted out of shape so he went to a cheap local hospital much used by sumo people and had it straightened out. Their method was simple. Two assistants held him down and the third shoved a wooden instrument up one nostril and levered it all back!

Non-judo people find strangles very frightening. When I was in the army a soldier heard me talking about strangles and asked to experience one. He acted as if they were nothing. So I duly obliged but he tapped out like lightning as soon as I tightened up around his neck.

Fifty years on we are all now very careful on the mat because of the possibility of litigation. Dojos have to provide qualified first-aiders and doctors at events and if in doubt a quick call is placed to emergency services. So I have to advise following this route and not attempting to try katsu yourself. I simply write about it to give you a flavour of how judo was in the past.

PS For more information on Katsu see the Kodokan Judo Kagaku Kenkyu Kiyo (Kodokan Judo Science Research Bulletins) Vols 1-6. 1958 - 84

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