

9 One Drop in the Great Mekong

— Judo Instruction in Laos —



Japan and the Mekong region countries*¹ have been deepening exchanges in recent years, and various projects are taking place in 2009, Mekong-Japan Exchange Year. Mr. Masatoshi Kikuchi is working hard to teach judo in Laos, a country along the Mekong.

Mr. Kikuchi was born and raised in Hirado City, Nagasaki Prefecture, and he first encountered judo in his first year in high school. He has been involved with judo for 40-some years, at Kyushu University, and Hazama Corporation, which he joined after graduation, and today, he is still involved at the age of 62. During his time at Hazama, he searched for training halls and diligently continued his practice of judo even during the six years when he was stationed in Singapore and Nepal. He contacted with the locals while living abroad. The idea came to him that he wanted to teach judo overseas after his retirement while sharing drinks after lessons. He was then driven by a strong feeling: "I am not guaranteed to be healthy until the time I retire. I would like to start activities now while I am mentally and physically in good shape." Mr. Kikuchi received advice from a master knowledgeable about judo and who is familiar with judo affairs abroad that the most suitable place for his contributions would be Laos. Mr. Kikuchi applied to become a JICA Senior Volunteer (SV) and was accepted, and thus his relationship with Laos began.

At the time he received his assignment in 2003, there were approximately 50 judo players in Laos. There was only one training hall, and it did not have many skillful players. Mr. Kikuchi thought that in order to strengthen judo in Laos, first of all it would be necessary to boost the skills of the current players. He worked to increase their ability by having them participate in matches with other regional countries such as Viet Nam and Thailand. He also used various other ideas in teaching judo to the people of Laos. He focused on warm ups, placing top priority on avoiding injuries, and he gave repeatedly lessons on radio exercises, as well as "judo



Giving instruction at a local training hall. (Mr. Kikuchi is kneeling.)
(Photo: Mr. Kikuchi)

forms" and footwork of the Kodokan Judo Institute style in Japan. Mr. Kikuchi taught not only how to win, but also the internationally-accepted manner of conducting matches. These tireless effort yielded results. The judo players in Laos got stronger and some of them gradually began winning gold medals in matches with foreign countries. In 2007, at a tournament in the South East Asia Games (SEA Games) in Thailand, in which the best athletes in the region participate, Laos came in the third place out of nine countries, and two Lao athletes won gold medals. In response to these results, the government of Laos presented Mr. Kikuchi with the honorable Labor Medal and requested that he continue his instruction after the end of his term as SV for the SEA Games to be held in Laos in December 2009. Mr. Kikuchi accepted the offer with delight.

Mr. Kikuchi, who is doing his best to give instruction for this important tournament, has also contributed in other areas. He had the experience of being involved with ODA projects when he was stationed overseas with Hazama. Mr. Kikuchi and the people of Laos requested the governments of Japan and Laos to construct a martial arts center using Cultural Grant Assistance from the Japanese government. The martial arts center was completed in November 2009, and hosted the judo matches during the SEA Games in December, and Lao athletes marked great results.*²

Mr. Kikuchi has confidence in the development of judo in Laos and says, "I am working not only to teach techniques and how to win, but also to develop well-mannered, internationally-minded people, although it may only be a drop of water in the great Mekong River." Mr. Kikuchi says that after the tournament, he would like to consistently contribute some kind of support to Buddhist country of Laos with which he has become acquainted.



Athletes in training and Japanese coaches in front of the newly-built martial arts center. (Mr. Kikuchi is in the back on the far right.)
(Photo: Mr. Kikuchi)

*1 Cambodia, Thailand, Viet Nam, Myanmar, Laos

*2 2 Gold Medals, 5 Silver Medals, 4 Bronze Medals