

Why Do I Train?

By
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“Karate is like boiling water, it must remain on the heat”.
Gichin Funakoshi (1868-1957)

Terminology

Throughout this text I will use Japanese words associated with karate and the martial arts. Although many Japanese words do not have a direct translation into English, what follows is a good example.

Karate-do – Kara (empty) te (hand) do (way) = to follow the way of the empty hand

Dojo - training hall

Sensei – teacher / Instructor

Karate-ka – a person who practices karate

Gi – karate uniform (the famous karate pyjamas!)

Joe Bloggs – general public

The question “why do I train?”

This question is probably the most difficult question of all to answer. To explain to fellow karate-ka is hard enough, but to explain why karate means so much to me to the general public is an almost impossible task.

This is mainly due to the fact that karate and the martial arts in general have been misunderstood or misrepresented by the media. The general public only have the guidance of what they see in films or on the television. This is usually produced for entertainment, fun or commercial gain. All of these are far from the moral or true purpose behind karate.

So what is so special about karate?

I will explain what karate means to me and hopefully give the reader a better understanding of what karate is and why I have trained for so many years!

Self protection

This is probably one of the main reasons many people start any kind of martial art. Karate, like all martial arts was developed to protect oneself or others (i.e. loved ones, King, Lord, etc). So any martial art worth studying has to 'work', and realistic training must be the underlying factor to all martial arts.

There are many so called karate clubs which do not hold this quality as a priority and train in a more 'aesthetic' way. Karate clubs which are only concerned with 'the way they look' are merely 'playing' at karate. These clubs would be considered to practice a kind of dance performed in a karate gi.

Ironically, with self protection being one of the most important aspects of karate, it becomes a by-product of the whole study of karate. There are many many more qualities associated with studying karate over a long period; just defending oneself becomes a routine habit.

This is not to say that once you are a 'black belt' you can never be beaten. As the saying goes "there is always someone bigger than you." Every karate-ka learns this very early on, and this is part of gaining humility (a quality I will look at later).

When people say to me "Ah you are a black belt, you must be able to fight many men at once," I just cringe inside and give a big smile and a friendly shake of the head and say "depends if I have a gun or not"!!

Whenever I am explaining the concepts of karate to Joe Bloggs, I try to convert the concept into a familiar or common situation that they can associate with. For the 'invincible karate man' I usually say "just because someone can swim, it does not mean that they will never drown."

For example, if a competent swimmer and a non-swimmer were dropped in the ocean, the swimmer would surely have a 'better chance' of survival, but may still drown. However, the non-swimmer will most definitely drown. My point is the person who is trained will stand a better chance of survival.

Fitness & Good Health

It is without doubt that fitness and good health are of extreme importance when studying karate. Many people begin karate solely for this reason in mind; to be quite honest, there are far better ways of "just keeping fit" (i.e. a gym).

When a person trains with only the interest of getting fit, they tend to neglect or miss the many other attributes which karate has to offer. It has been said that *'one must get fit for karate and not use karate to get fit'*.

I personally have gained from the health benefits of karate. As a child I was rather large for my age; I was over 90kg (14 stone) at age 12 and was “sporting” a 36-inch waist! I was placed under the care of the dietician at the local hospital to reduce my weight and improve my health. I suffered from bronchitis each year and was told that it would not get better if I continued gaining weight.

My weight now (aged 34) is around 78 to 79kg (12.5 stone), I have maintained this weight since I was 16 years old. This I attribute partly to growing up, but largely due to my continuing study of karate. It is because of this physical benefit that I maintain a healthy diet and look after my joints with supplements. In following this schedule I hope to remain training well into my twilight years.

Education / Self development

Karate has been an extremely valuable and rewarding learning experience for me. I left school with no real qualifications to my name. I began work via the ‘Youth Training Scheme’ (YTS), which resulted in my first full-time employment.

Because of my “intense” interest in karate and eagerness to learn, I found myself purchasing books and magazines to further my knowledge. Over the past 24 years my interest in martial arts has led to my book collection reaching in excess of 250 books.

Now to someone who reads a lot this may not seem to be that many. But I can honestly say that I cannot remember reading a complete book at school. By reading so much over the years I have increased my vocabulary and educated myself far beyond my school education.

I now write frequent articles about karate, which have been published on several occasions in national and international magazines and on the internet. I have recently finished a 10,000 word thesis required for my 4th Dan grading. This to me (an uneducated child) is a great achievement and one I owe to karate.

Discipline / Dedication

Discipline plays a very important role while practicing karate. Because of the nature of karate it can be potentially dangerous, so discipline must be used by everyone. Discipline in the dojo encourages the students to use discipline outside the dojo in their everyday lives.

Everyone knows that to hold down a job, one must show punctuality, good manners, a willingness to learn and of course show discipline. This is where karate can help in everyday life and not just in the dojo.

Dedication is also an important quality for the study of karate. Everyone knows the saying “you only get out what you put in”. If one only trains once a week, one will not obtain very much at all. However, if one trains 3 to 4 times a week, then the rewards will be greater. This theory applies to almost everything which needs to be achieved.

Humility / Honesty

True karate requires a person to be both humble and honest, not only with others but with oneself. If a person cannot welcome instruction and accept criticism, than he will not grow or develop. This also relates to activities outside the dojo. I have met many adults who “know best” and cannot stand back and listen, especially if that person is ‘younger’ than they are!

I believe it is because for many people when they leave school around the age of 16 they do not receive regular tuition, so their ‘learning habits’ are laid to rest. So later on in life, when someone is trying to show them something ‘new’ they find it hard to accept these changes. However, with karate one is always learning and being corrected. It is a constant cycle of learning, achieving and then learning again.

Personal achievements / confronting one’s fears

Karate, like many other physical activities, offers the practitioner ‘personal achievements’. However, I believe karate is unique because it offers the student a way of developing oneself and confronting one’s fears. This is a result of becoming a humble and honest person.

Before a person confronts his own fears, he must first recognize them and then “accept” them. For this a person must be honest and willing to “challenge” those fears. By studying karate for a number of years, I have recognized and overcome certain fears and weaknesses that I have as a person.

At the age of 21, I indulged in employment on a nightclub door. Although I told people the reason was to earn some extra money (the pay was quite good!), the real reason was because I have always been afraid of ‘confrontation’.

It has been a feeling that I have had ever since I can remember. No matter how much I wished this was not the case, my body and mind could not lie. So I thought the best way of dealing with this was to confront it and throw myself in at the deep end!

I figured that the best place to find “confrontation” was in a nightclub. Do not get me wrong; I did not go looking for trouble (I could have got drunk and found that no problem). I wanted to put myself in a situation which allowed me to confront and hopefully overcome my fear.

Working on 'the door' of a city nightclub definitely has its fair share of confrontations, both physical and verbal. I worked at the club for 5 years every Friday and Saturday night; over this time I become better equipped to deal with my fear. However, after all these years it still lingers in the pit of my stomach, reminding me of its "subdued presence".

Lifelong objective

Karate is a marathon and not a sprint, although many eager students do want to 'master' it within a few years. To study karate seriously one must accept it is going to take a lifetime to achieve. Master Gichin Funakoshi (1868-1957) the Father of modern day karate once said "One lifetime is not long enough to master karate".

I can honestly say that each year which passes gets better and far more rewarding than the last. I cannot think of many activities which can offer the depth, reward, physical benefits, personal development, education and general wellbeing which true karate can.

People often ask "why does it take so long?" I say to them "think of a carpenter!" He would start off as an apprentice, and after so many years he will have learnt the basic trade. He then goes on to learning the trade thoroughly and after many years he will be a skilled craftsman.

If we were to ask a newly qualified carpenter and a skilled carpenter of say 30 to 40 years experience to make a piece of furniture, they would both use the same kind of tools and use the same material. However, the more experienced carpenter would make a far superior piece of furniture. Why is this?

My lifelong goal is to practice karate for as long as I can. In doing so I will continue improving and refining the many qualities karate has to offer. I have tried to keep this essay as short as possible. Although there are many more qualities and benefits I could write about, I must finish here. I cannot say exactly "why" I train; all I do know is I "must" train....it's what I do!

"The final aim is not to overcome others, but to overcome one's self. Unless we overcome ourselves, how can we expect to overcome others?"

Masatoshi Nakayama (1913-1987)