

What Karate means to me

Introduction

A young man stands, his head slightly bowed and his hands held cupped before him. His hair is tied back and he wears a short black beard. The young man's eyes are closed, looking inward, and his unlined face sits calmly, in repose. In front of him is a lectern, lined with microphones and behind him hangs a picture showing the face of his opponent, staring vengefully over the young man's shoulder. Surrounding him, a group of men, their fingers waving in accusation, inches from his face. At him, they scream charges of 'traitor', 'dog' and 'scum', their eyes revealing violent fury laced with fear. He has been ordered to denounce himself publicly and will soon be imprisoned, his freedom left at the whim of his opponent. The young man stands calmly, looking inward, unaffected.

In my understanding, the master of Budo cannot be defeated. This is because the continued pursuance of the path is the victory, as opposed to the achievement of any range of more ephemeral goals. My purpose in studying Karate is to become a follower of the martial path as well as to gain the strength to live by the precepts that I value. These precepts are dictated by my own reason and are drawn from Budo and its Western cousin Stoicism. Further to this, I study Karate because of a range of benefits I experience through my continued training.

My Precepts

My first precept is to control my mind. It is something I find difficult on a daily basis. However, since I began Karate I have gained much greater control. I find the mental demands of regular training quite strenuous but I believe it is this challenge which empowers my resolve. I hope that as I continue to train the power of my resolve will continue to grow till I can control what I think and how I feel.

My second precept is to avoid the disgrace of the mind and spirit failing before the body. I know a bloke called Ryan; the other day he was drunk and I saw him fall off his chair. He fell not only because he was drunk, but because his

legs don't work properly and this makes it hard for him to balance. His spirit is unhealthy and he is essentially waiting to die. Because of this, he doesn't do the exercise necessary to keep his legs working and his body is slowly shutting down. He is roughly the same age as Hanshi, Alan and Ted. Inevitably, my body will one day fail; my continued training in Karate is intended to keep my mind and spirit healthy until that day.

My third precept is to act with detachment. By this, I mean to assess the characteristics of a situation and to choose the best course of action as opposed to acting purely on instinct. In Karate, I practice this in Kumite by paying close attention to my opponent and planning my technique based on their style. I have found that I can often manage difficult situations by keeping the ideal resolution in mind rather than reacting to events as they happen.

My fourth precept is to act empirically. The masters of our style teach us to punch in a certain way. They do not do this simply because they like it or because it looks cool. It is taught like this because they have spent many years testing and refining the punch until they can honestly say that this is the most effective technique that has been developed so far. In my life I have encountered – and been taken in by – many purveyors of rhetoric who are good, intelligent and likeable people but who will stridently teach as fact ideas which have little empirical basis. It is my goal to treat every idea like I treat my Karate punch.

My fifth precept is to act independently and disregard circumstances. I believe that my ultimate goal in Karate is probably to be able to act according to my nature and according to my reason whether people agree with my actions or not and whether this is done in easy times or difficult times.

The Benefits of Karate

Regular training has had a lot of benefits for me. Learning to fight is something that I value greatly. Whilst I do not fight physically outside of Karate, I use the techniques we learn in Kumite as much as possible in everyday life. I have also appreciated the improvement in my body and the greater confidence that training has brought. In addition, it gives me a sense of satisfaction when I train that I am doing something positive.

Conclusion

A young man stands calmly, looking inward, unaffected. He is in the control of his opponent who is very powerful. The young man knew the personal consequences of challenging his opponent but his reason compelled him. He is imprisoned in terrible conditions for over a decade. The young man continues to follow his path truly during this time and up until his death many years later. His opponent dies a supremely powerful man, surrounded by enemies and in fear for his life.

In the words of Dicky Barrett and Joe Gittleman “I’m not a coward, I’ve just never been tested, I like to think that if I was I would pass”. I hope I never have to use the techniques I’ve learned in Karate in a real fight. I hope that following the martial path never means that choosing the correct action puts me in danger of life and limb. I trust that if I do live through interesting times I will not stray from the path and that I have the conviction to act according to my reason and nature, irregardless of the personal consequences.

As a final point, I wish to thank the people I have learnt from. Hanshi Kenshu Hideo Watanabe and all of the members of his dojo. I also want to acknowledge a number of authors whose writings have provided guidance in my training and helped to inspire this essay: Inazo Nitobe, Sun Tzu and his Art of War, Jung Chang, Jon Halliday, the 10th Panchen Lama, Marcus Aurelius and his Meditations, Chin-Ning Chu and John Steinbeck.

Thank You,

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