

WHAT KARATE MEANS TO ME

Jason Olivier 28/12/2007

Shihan,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my view of Karate with you and the dojo. The more I thought about the question "what does Karate mean to me?" the more I realised what an extraordinary journey I have begun, and appreciate the enormous impact this journey has made in shaping who I am; considering I was first exposed to Karate in 1976 it's a sobering thought that it's taken this time and moment of reflection, to acknowledge the impact.

I'm fascinated by the many aspects Karate presents that entice us to start this journey. I have seen others wrestle with different entry points - mine is a journey of self-discovery through studying Karate, which is a paradox as I believe success with Karate is about forgetting the self and being one with the moment (or your opponent), and as I'm still learning about myself I clearly have a long way to travel.

None the less it is a journey I must take and Karate is my path to achieving this. Karate theory is always tested in a practical manner; grounding theory in reality shows its strengths and exposes its weakness. At my level of learning, applying Karate theory exposes more about me than it does about the techniques I'm trying to master. This presents a wonderful opportunity as it allows me to see myself as others see me. So fundamentally Karate for me is a reference, or perhaps better described as a compass that enables me to steer my life in a better direction.

When I started Karate in the mid 70's my life style at the time was reckless and indulgent and not conducive for Karate, so after a brief beginning I stopped but reconnected again in the 80's - it was a seminal moment. I'd just returned from living in New York exhausted from a two year party lifestyle. I was back in Sydney claiming I'd reformed, only to be undone by a glamorous New York model who arrived unannounced and told all and sundry that I'd promised her marriage - possibly true but I had no recollection of ever doing so. She made a big impression particularly at her departure, which was very soon after her arrival, and at this point the wives of my closest friends thought I'd gone too far and I was suddenly out on my own. It was a tough time. I had come back with the intention to change my ways and I had to do it - but do it by myself.

Rebuilding me was very difficult. It required commitment, consistency and focus, I couldn't do this without structure and that's what Karate offered me. My initial goal was to stay off cigarettes and get fit, but I was learning real karate and it was weaving its magic. The simple things were being taught properly, like taking a breath, and from these very simple actions very complex interaction could be taught and for me this is the beauty of karate connecting the body, mind and spirit through a series of uncompromised steps that have been tested and tempered in

combat so there is no ambiguity only one practical, proven, understandable path to follow.

I was actually discovering how to live properly. Karate gave me self-respect and confidence and values to live by. It was a slow repetitive process but the consistency worked, I have built genuine friendships and became the proud father of two lovely young adults. Unfortunately the relationship with their mother floundered. Once again Karate helped, it kept me focused on the present and on the positive.

Karate took on more importance as the children got older. It enabled me to involve them in a journey where we shared exactly the same experiences. We could all face the same challenges, unaffected by the difficulties of a parental break up or other baggage. Therefore we had a common task that we could share and experience.

It's interesting to consider that as students we are beneficiaries of life knowledge that teaches us how to live and act through a martial art. It is living knowledge learnt through experience. It cannot be taught from a book. It can only be understood by actively seeking answers - try it and question it - always ask why?

I find it incredible to think that in Australia we are privileged to learn Karate from your-self; a master teacher with a direct lineage to past masters who can instruct us from this enormous depth of accumulated experience. It is knowledge that's been tested, questioned and refined by each master and then passed on through the lineage. You are introducing this knowledge to all of us and we are all at different degrees of understanding and applying it. I feel I'm in the curious position of walking in the footsteps of my children who have surpassed me in Karate. It's almost like seeing what my future might have been if I'd not squandered its potential. So by this process the past and future are focused into the present moment which is where Karate really shines.

As a compass for living Karate gives me a reference to gauge how to live properly, and of course present a clear reference point by which others can judge how I'm doing. My personal entry point to karate was defined by a wish to improve myself. The journey continues, it's real, requires active engagement, many challenges and a certain amount of pain. Although I have been on this journey for a number of years I have only scratched the surface of where this can take me, but it is structured and practical and it is possible to look back to the past, even forward to a future and clearly see where you are on this journey at any given moment.

As I finished writing this essay I thought I would read a little of the Hagakure, the book of the Samurai, and see if it would help clarify my thinking. I opened the book at random and read the first page presented to me. I was amazed at the coincidence of what it said as it really sums up my approach to Karate. I therefore felt it appropriate to close on this quote.

“There is surely nothing other than the single purpose of the present moment. A man’s whole life is a succession of moment after moment. If one fully understands the present moment there would be nothing else to do and nothing else to pursue. Live being true to the single purpose of the moment.

Everyone lets the present moment slip by, then looks for it as though he thought it were somewhere else. No one seems to have noticed this fact. But grasping this firmly, one must pile experience upon experience. And once one has come to this understanding he will be a different person from that point on, though he may not always bear it in mind. When one understands this settling into single mindedness well, his affairs will thin out. Loyalty is also contained in this single-mindedness.”