

## *WHAT KARATE MEANS TO ME*

*Maria Jenkins*

From the very first episode of The Samurai starring Koichi Ose as Shintaro Akikusa, an intense fire ignited within me. From that moment I understood the path I needed to follow and that Martial Arts would play a very important role in that journey. At the age of 3 little did I know then how important that would become.

Being the eldest daughter of a mixed racial marriage with traditions predominately European, my future was destined to become a dutiful and attentive daughter, wife and mother. Any aspirations I had were immediately squashed and told "Good girls don't think nor do things like that". So I continued to become the most obedient, "good girl" doing whatever was required of me, constantly trying my utmost to please my parents. I always felt my best was never enough and was often told I was a failure. The harder I tried the more difficult my life became. As a result I suffered many years of sadness. Despite the difficulties I encountered I never lost sight of my path nor did I allow the fire to extinguish completely.

In 1994 my ex-husband decided that our daughter Cassandra was going to pursue a career in Martial Arts, so together we visited 10 Dojo's in the Inner West. When we arrived at Rozelle I immediately recognized Shihan to be the Master who would somehow guide me through the path I have been seeking.

It took another 5 years for changes to occur but during that time Karate was already making a huge impact on my life. Being a spectator mum I was able to listen, watch and learn and through this process was able to see the destructive patterns that needed to change. After major decisions and lifestyle changes, I took a leap of faith and joined the club.

It was difficult at first to be surrounded by so many fit, attractive muscle bound bodies. Great eye candy but left me feeling very self conscious of my body image, feeling more suited to Sumo wrestling than Karate. Only through training did I too find my body. Angelina Jolie is wearing it this lifetime but seriously I am learning to accept that the body I have now is the only one I need to nurture and respect. Due to past experiences I severed the relationship I had with my body, pretending it did not belong to me, allowing it to be abused and punished. Karate has reunited the relationship of body, mind and spirit allowing me to be whole again. I am now able to respect myself and accept respect from others.

Through Karate I found unconditional love, something I had not felt worthy of until now. Love through Shihan, a Master whose aim is to ensure his student's future is bigger and better than his own. A Master who is assisting me in finding my path, allowing me to make mistakes and to understand that there is no such thing as failure just opportunities to learn, change and grow.

Love through Mitchi, my best friend, mentor, teacher and student. With him I have made incredible breakthroughs in understanding and accepting who I am. Our journey together has been one of blood, sweat and many tears.

Love through the "Titans" Shihan, Toshi, David, Pav, and Robert Sensei, Mitchi and Anthony Sempai, I observe Budo in action. They live and follow the true Warrior code of Martial Arts with love and dedication. Something I strive to accomplish every day. Love through all students, past and present. You have showed me stamina, courage, determination, trust and friendship.

The qualities I have learned from all of you I use, not only in the Dojo, but also in my family life, work and relationships, allowing me to be the very best person I can be. I have become more focused, confident and progressive. Opening up opportunities I never imagined possible. The camaraderie and generosity within the Dojo is amazing. I get driven home most training nights. Most of you have to go in the opposite direction and without hesitation or complaint.

It was your love and support during my surgery and recovery that kept me strong and determined even though at times I wanted to give up. It was Sanchin and the Precious exercises that prevented me from being an invalid. Sanchin provided strength, focus, increased bone density and optimum health, a concrete basis for surgical intervention. The Precious exercises provided gentle, controlled flow of energy to help repair my body after surgery, enabling me to return to training.

Following surgery it was very difficult, at first, to accept that Kumite would not be a part of my training. With support from all of you, I have come to understand that when you fight, I am fighting with you. Thanks to your achievements and mistakes, I will be able to take with me all the applications and knowledge of Kumite, Mawashi geri kicks and other techniques to the next life. I understand that we do not train alone but with the energy of our lineage, that is the essence of who we are. We are never alone in our struggles but one with each other.

Karate has taught me the need to be patient with myself, to accept limitations and to acknowledge my achievements. I always thought I had to strive for perfection in order to be "good" which led to guilt and self loathing if I made mistakes. Through Karate I understand that I don't have to be perfect, doing my very best each session of training and throughout every day is what is important.

Karate has allowed me to express my understanding of spirituality freely without fear of rejection or misunderstanding. My senses are more acute, I have a stronger connection to the Earth's energy and can be happy and content with life (most of the time).

I am learning through Karate that there needs to be a balance between Humility and Ego. I am proud of the fact that I belong to the most historically respected Dojo and that the standards are very high and Shihan a strict and difficult task Master. Only the strong willed and dedicated survive, but in order to remain here I also understand my purpose in serving others, being self reflective and accepting criticism when given.

It's still not easy to travel the path up this mountain I have chosen. I know that training is the key. There is so much more for me to learn and understand, and by continuing to put in time and effort, the top of the mountain gets closer to achieving.

There is not one area of my existence that has not been influenced by my Karate training. If I continue to write all the benefits of Karate I would end up writing a book. So what does Karate mean to me, simply?

I AM KARATE AND KARATE IS ME