

What Karate Means to Me

By Heather Meredith
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I began studying karate in order to develop my physical fitness. I chose karate because I knew I liked the discipline of the martial arts and the pride and spirit I observed in other martial artists. When I began, however, I did not expect karate to become such an important and meaningful part of my life. This essay is an exploration of that meaning: how karate has affected me, what I love about karate, and how it continues to encourage me to become better physically, personally, and spiritually.

When I began studying karate, I expected the spirit developed in class to be a 'fighting spirit'. While this is definitely a part of karate, I found its emphasis on compassion, sharing, gratitude, courtesy, self-reflection, respect, and learning quite unexpected and entirely amazing. Karate has become a means of keeping me in closer contact with myself: my fears, weaknesses, strengths, and hopes; and by doing so it has enriched my relationships with others. I have come to believe that karate is about guiding students to become better people - not forcing us or even showing us - but giving us the opportunity and the encouragement to learn and improve.

Traditions of Courtesy and Respect

One of the ways in which karate inspires me to be better is through its traditions. Many karate traditions are, in fact, physical embodiments of courtesy and respect. For example, bowing to teachers and those who have gone before us at the beginning and ending of each class, and bowing to partners before working with them in class. Not only does this create a respectful and comfortable environment within the dojo, but it also instills in us a sense of how we ought to treat one another.

I have found that as I become accustomed to this behaviour, I am beginning to apply it in the rest of my life as well. For instance, like the bow, I now try to consciously recognize at the beginning of classes at school that my professor has traveled before me and is sharing his or her knowledge for my benefit. While I still critically examine the professor's teachings, I have found that by consciously showing respect and opening my mind, I am able to discover wisdom that I may have overlooked before.

Learning to Learn

Karate has also taught me a new way of learning. One of the greatest lessons that I have learned in karate is that true learning is up to me: the greatest battle is with myself. In karate there is no punishment for a lack of effort, you simply do not learn. As Peter Urban says in "The Karate Dojo: Traditions and Tales of a Martial Art":

An individual is a single fighting unit complete unto himself. His actions are governed by his intuitive judgement: there is neither punishment nor reward for his effort or lack of it. One's initiative determines the degree of skill, knowledge, spirit, and how the three are integrated.

This style, which emphasizes treasuring each moment and creating your own learning experiences is a fundamental shift from the ends-based learning emphasized in school.

In many of my years of school, I felt that I was not learning for myself. My courses, for the most part, had been required for my degree, and the fast pace of the program and ends-based method of evaluation meant that I would learn the concept and seldom ask why I was learning it or what it meant for me. In school I had become conditioned to work only for results, and perhaps even more disturbingly, only results dictated by others. Karate has taught me an entirely

new style of learning. It has taught me to learn from mistakes, learn from others, and to *make* learning experiences whereas before I would wait for them. In class we constantly try new things – be it a new technique or a new drill – and this forces me to break out of habits, to face my fear of looking silly in front of people, and to laugh at myself and my many mistakes.

Karate also emphasizes helping others as a part of our own development. This too amazed me; we have partners rather than opponents and we learn from sharing and supporting each other. I love the way that in karate, teaching and helping others is an important part of learning. In our dojo, I am often asked to help with the lower belts. I always feel a greater understanding of my own karate when I demonstrate a form, when I watch areas that they are struggling with, and when I am asked to explain why we do something a particular way. I also teach LSAT and GMAT preparatory courses part-time and this lesson from karate has helped me to see that through teaching others I can learn a great deal about myself.

Finally, the martial virtue of gratitude has affected my style of learning. Senpai Daley once spoke to us about the martial virtues of compassion, respect, and gratitude. She explained gratitude as always feeling thankful for, among other things, when someone offers you a suggestion. You may in the end reject the suggestion, but consideration of it and a real gratitude that someone has taken the time to try to make you better is the key. I have found that the more I am able to feel real gratitude when others teach me, criticize me, and share with me, and the more I am more able to replace pride and fear of being wrong with flexibility and openness, the more I learn.

Self Reflection & The Physical Challenge of Karate

Karate has inspired in me a degree of self-reflection that I do not often give into in other areas of my life. First, I believe that the tradition of beginning and ending each karate session with the *mokuso* is a very important lesson. Combined with karate's emphasis on taking charge of your own learning, this has taught me to set goals, consider what I have learned, and to reevaluate my choices and direction.

Second, the physical challenges in karate have enabled me to learn a great deal about myself. I have learned about my motivations, strengths, weaknesses, and fears by observing and considering my reactions to the real challenges presented in karate. For instance, I have learned that I am extremely determined (a.k.a. stubborn) - I will do just about anything to reach a goal that I have set for myself. Recognizing this in my karate has enabled me to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of this quality for both karate and other areas of my life. I have realized that I need to become more in tune with my motivations for reaching a goal and to consciously re-evaluate both the goal and my motivations to ensure that I do not become single minded in my pursuit of it.

Finally, any discussion of what karate means cannot neglect the importance of training for physical health. Karate has been, and continues to be, an important part of maintaining and improving my physical health. While I am not a body-builder by anyone's standards, karate has certainly improved my flexibility, endurance and strength. Also, through the karate breathing, I am generally healthier and better able to deal with stress.

The physical challenge of karate combined with its self-reflective element makes me

grateful that I have health and physical strength - such an incredible gift that I so often take for granted. I find that I can come into the dojo after a day of preoccupation with trivial problems that have grown out of proportion in my mind and really find perspective in the physical/reflective side of karate.

The Meaning of Karate

It is difficult for me to answer exactly what karate means. I do believe that karate encourages me to be a better person by instilling in me a sense of real courtesy and respect, by inspiring in me a more robust understanding of learning and encouraging me to take charge of my own learning experiences, and by supporting my movement toward increased and enhanced self-reflection. The physical challenge of karate and the health benefits it provides are undoubtedly a key reason why karate is so important to me; however, as Rui Umezawa explains in “The Empty Hand: A Karate Workbook”:

If you imagine karate as being a deep lake or a pond, then learning how to kick and punch and to defend yourself are only the water’s surface. There is much more to learn in the depths below. There you may even find a reflection of life itself.

I am just beginning to see that reflection and I feel intense gratitude for my teachers who have helped me to see it and who continue to encourage me to learn and improve physically, personally, and spiritually.