

What is the meaning of Karate?

Shona kindly contributed this article, which is drawn from her own experiences. Apart from learning what made Shona start karate, she gives an insight on why she continues to train – over 20 years later. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it, and hope you do too.

Well, do any of us really think we know or have the answer to “What is the Meaning of Karate?” As a practicing martial artist for over 20 years all that can be offered are some of my own personal experiences and explanations of what karate means me.

As Karate can mean different things to each individual, there can be no right or wrong answer. We all experience our own personal triumphs and tribulations during our own martial arts journey.

As a student moving through the early kyu grades, you drive yourself with a fierce desire to earn your black belt. The journey from beginner to black belt can hold the most cherished of memories and experiences. It is worth remembering that not everyone who starts the journey with you completes it.

Many of us come to karate for a variety of reasons, to get fit, make friends or may have friends already who train, self-defense or just purely to try something different. I came to karate quite by chance as an adult aged 19. One of my friends had been mugged for her handbag. It was on a dark winter's evening at tea time as she was on her way home from work. Two youths pushed her to the ground, stole her bag and then ran off - leaving her lying on the pavement, terrified and in tears. So I originally went along to karate to support my friend.

When you begin taking classes you try to learn all these stances, punches, blocks, kicks etc. It seems like so much to learn and take in;

that you think you'll never learn or remember anything. You hear all these Japanese terms being used and haven't a clue what they mean. As the first few months pass, you slowly begin to learn some of the moves and remember some of the names and terms for your new found skills, and before you know it- you're **hooked!**.

So I would say that at this point that karate already had meaning for me. Although I was probably



Master Gichin Funakoshi

not too aware of, but the drive and determination to strive forward, to improve and perfect my new found skills had already begun.

Before you know it, the time comes to start taking your gradings. A reward if you like, to have your chance to show what you have learned. The challenge of a kyu grading is much more than just going up on the dojo floor and trying your best to show the sensei your moves - your kata etc. There is also the mental challenge. You may be feeling nervous, scared, and unsure of what will be asked of you - your stomach may be churning round and around. But this is also an important learning process in karate; to help build your confidence as well as your stamina. It can also play an important part in developing your own strength of character. And **yes**, I went through all these emotions and feelings at kyu grades just like everyone else! Once you have passed your grading, the feeling of self achievement is a glorious one. Don't forget you now have a new colour of belt round your waist to prove it. The journey has begun, this elated feeling now has you totally hooked and you can't wait to learn more.

Karate has so much to give, if you open your heart, mind and soul to it. Through regular training, you sometimes learn without realizing it,

and soon becomes a part of your life. I found instructors and senior grades were always willing to help you improve and pass on some of their own learning. This also in turn helped them have a better understanding of their own karate.

Time passes so quickly between kyu grades and before you know it you have learned and improved your karate moves better-you have learned and are expected to remember several katas, and more complex techniques, and you can move through the grading system too. All the while you are learning more and more and the fantastic thing in all this is that- “you continually want to learn more”. The meaning of karate is coming into force and you soon begin to realize there is a whole lot more to learning a martial art than just the pure physical side of your abilities. You start to understand that there is another side to the meaning of karate, The psychological aspect which drives and inspires you forward giving you the will to strive and learn more.

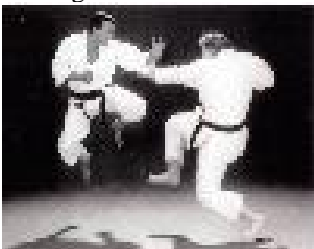
Outside karate of course, you have a personal life. For me coming into karate at an adult age allowed me the energy to work, train and in general, lead a normal happy life. Oh and get married! A few years later I had 2 boys. For obvious reasons, I took a break from karate as being a wife and mum to 2 boys aged under 2 (both still in nappies) presented a whole new set of challenges in itself. Although unable to train and do physical karate, the mental stamina of my training definitely helped me be a good wife and mum. When I took my break from karate I had reached 3rd kyu. Although my karate was on hold, if you like, I always knew that one day I would return and take it up again. So during your life karate has a meaning at different stages in your life, but it never really leaves you.

When I took the plunge and returned to karate some years later- part of you feels like a beginner all over again. You remember lots of the moves, blocks, kicks, etc, but the

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names and terms had totally gone, locked away in the back of my mind, and of course my body conditioning had totally changed. I felt I'd lost my fitness level I once had and wondered if I'd ever be able to find it again. Then there were the katas, several of them at first attempts merge into one. Before you know it you've invented a whole new kata - not the ones which are 100's of years old and have special meanings! But you rediscover your love of the challenges of karate, just as before, so instinctively you have all you need- the will to learn- so the meaning of karate is still there for you if you want it.

So here I am, back training, learning and unlocking some of my forgotten skills - but this time it's different. My oldest son has begun training. This in itself gives you personal satisfaction, to see them learning and having fun. I can only imagine that for a child, the learning and understanding of karate is much different than for an adult. Most children are naturally agile, so the techniques and movements come more naturally to them. Capturing their minds is the secret. Most adults on the other hand are generally less fit; it is something we have to continue to work at as well as training our minds.



Senseis Dave Hazard & Aidan Trimble

Now I'm back training with my son and before I know it, I'm starting to find I do remember more karate than I thought I would, but the physical side is harder now than before. (must have been those 2 children). Time goes by, my fitness improves and some of my old confidence begins to return. I think to myself, "Maybe I could grade again." Lots of years have now passed since I originally began karate at 19, I am now 31 and finding that all I had done from

before could be recaptured. The inspirations and feeling you get from performing before, during and after a grading come alive again. You still have the same nerves as before as well as the joy, relief and elation post-grading. Your drive, ability and the self satisfaction you feel was worth every moment, and once again karate has real meaning to you. You feel on top of the world. Ah, but now as a parent, you feel all the same anxieties and worries for your child. You're also mentally going through their challenges with them, whether it is at a class, training course or a grading. You're learning to look at karate through their eyes too. Practicing karate with other family members training at the club also has double benefits. You get to see how your child has progressed and learned -just like yourself, so you share an extra family bond, which is very satisfying. So karate can have many emotional feelings tied with it, in a very positive way. Over time, my son progressed through and managed to pass Shodan some years later, which gave me a huge amount of pride and satisfaction. He took a break from karate not long after due to other interests that teenagers often find as they develop and grow up. He preferred golf and football, so karate was at this point in his life not so important. I still believe that he learned a lot from his training and hopefully one day, he will return to karate and pick up where he left off. Obviously I felt a bit of sadness about his choice but as a parent you cannot force them into something they don't want to do. My younger son has now started training and starting out on his karate journey, so I still have all the emotions of before, with my son and I training together. I feel that, when family members train together the emotional learning's of karate, from a parent's point of view, are so much more involved.

Time passes further and I've reached 1st kyu. My biggest challenge is fast approaching, to go for 1st Dan. I feel that this is a time to reflect on all my kyu grades and training from a beginner till this very point in time. Looking back at my coloured belt

gradings, I think of them as laying the very foundations of my karate. I feel this gave me the strength and focus to carry on and use them as a stepping stone to black belt. If you have built good foundations, the rest can only go from strength to strength.

When the time comes to take upon your Dan grade and pass you suddenly realize that the expert you strove to become on reaching that prized coveted black belt is just a myth. Yes, you should be delighted with your fantastic achievement because all that effort and hard work you have put in has paid off. It is a brilliant feeling to pass Shodan and you should take the time to enjoy and savor that moment when you are told you have passed as it is something that you will truly treasure forever.

Now, having said that passing black belt makes you an expert is a myth; I had better explain. Once the elation has passed and it sinks in you are now a black belt; you realize your "apprenticeship" and journey has only truly just begun. Making your way through the kyu grades is like learning to drive; you have always had someone guiding you along the way. Passing a Dan grade means you have to take the wheel. You may feel that you have to be on your own more now. Of course you will never really be on your own, you will still have the help and support that you always had, but in a different way and perhaps with new responsibilities to yourself and others. I guess what I'm trying to say is that what karate means to you starts to change. You are beginning to have a more complete understanding of your karate. It's like having an enormous jigsaw puzzle that could last a lifetime. In the beginning, you only have a few pieces, but as time goes, by the picture becomes clearer and clearer. Of course you realize the jigsaw will never be fully finished and I've not met anyone yet who has finished theirs. We all continue to learn and experience new things with each class. We are building one piece on

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at a time, and the puzzle just gets bigger and bigger.

A short while after I passed shodan, my father passed away suddenly. I will always remember though that he was very proud that his daughter and grandson had black belts in karate. He took great pride in telling people how proud he was of our achievements. Although a difficult time to deal with the emotional traumas of the death of a loved one, I found that my training and focus improved in a different way, as when I trained I had my dad in my thoughts. The feeling of doing well through karate for my dad, gave me that extra bit of spirit; to achieve that little bit more. I also suppose it was an outlet to help me grieve if you like, through my karate. When I went for my 2nd Dan, I'd like to think there was a bit of my dad there, willing me along to do the very best I could. So karate helped me deal with my emotions inside and out of the dojo. I also feel karate has helped me in my working life, as karate builds confidence in your own abilities. You are mentally prepared to work and try that little bit harder to reach your own personal goals. You may work in a busy, hurried environment but your focus and concentration, which you learn from karate, can help you can switch off to all the hustle and bustle around. Also the opposite may be applied, when out and about on the streets you have also developed the skill to subconsciously be very aware of who or what is going on around you – zanshin in Japanese .

Unfortunately these days there can be a lot of unsavory people in society. Hopefully, your training will assist you in avoiding confrontations. Like my friend you may not have any choice in the matter. So you would be put in a position of making the choice of giving in and hand over what they want or use your karate as self-defense. You may be forced into a split-second decision of having to comply with the demand or to defend yourself. If you have to fight your way out, don't hesitate for a

moment, create an escape route and use it.

It's a tough decision and I hope I'm never in such a position to find out but these days you never know.

Your whole attitude to training in general, changes over time. The way you think and feel about karate is as strong as ever but as your ability and thoughts change, so too does the meaning of karate to you. When you get up on that dojo floor, what drives and pushes you comes from a totally different and deeper level. The difference is that in your mind you can see and feel the karate coming from the true spirit that is deep within you. This is when you truly feel you have found **your meaning of karate**.

As I've explained, when you realize that you are using **your spirit** and **your meaning of karate**, you can use it in your everyday life. You use it to help realize your potential. whether it be at home or work or with your family. This in my mind helps make you a better and enriched person for having a true and meaning understanding of karate in your life.

Who knows 5 or 10 years down the line from now I'm sure that what karate means to me will have changed again. I look forward to this, as I feel my life has only been positively affected by the fact that I have reaped a little bit of wisdom for myself.

If I had to sum up what Karate means to me, then I would have to say my life has been happier and more positive for training. Karate has helped me take on lots of challenges in my life and enabled me, through karate, to be able to be level-headed and to give fair judgment on those around me. You learn to treat each person as an individual, to be respectful of yourself and others. There is the fulfillment of seeing students progress through their grades, when you know you helped them reach their own goals and potential. I would also have to add self satisfaction in training and

hopefully learning the ability to defend myself.

One last thing, which is very important- **patience**. Learning karate cannot be hurried, take time to learn and absorb the knowledge at your own pace- after all you have a whole life time ahead of you.

As I said at the beginning there is no right or wrong answer to the meaning of karate. This is something you will have to answer for yourself; I hope this story helps anyone who may read it, to have a better understanding of their own personal journey to the meaning of karate.

Don't forget to put a piece of the jigsaw in if you do.

Inspired by all my past and present students and teachers of karate

Shona Brown 2nd Dan
(Inspiration, that's another story)