

The Bigger Picture

As I have gone through numerous years of training under my Senseis at JSKA, I have often noticed the parallels that exist between the sciences of karate and everyday life. For me, karate has grown from being a side-activity that stayed in the bounds of weekly classes to a central idea in my personality and a philosophy for life. Thanks to the thoughtful insights of my Senseis and my fellow karate enthusiasts, I've been able to gain a new view on life; a way of living governed by confidence, discipline, and respect. As I proceed to take a milestone shodan test for my karate career in June, I already know going in that I have been enlightened to the bigger picture.

I can still remember myself when I first began to train at Sensei Hunt's Rochester Dojo. I was about ten, on the heavier side for my age, and on the bridge to personal and social collapse. I had little motivation to go higher or do better in much else besides academics. I hardly kept good hygiene habits, lax to even brush my teeth in the morning. My athletic condition was poor at best, and I avoided physical work with passion. My fears were many, and they often caused me to make enemies out of others, and resent those who were better than me. I refused to make social contact for fear of being alienated, and in the end only succeeded in distancing myself and being alienated. When I look back at those years, I question how I could have been so ignorant. With my experience in karate I have learned unique life skills that I doubt I could have learned as easily anywhere else.

The first phrase in the Dojo Kun is "Jin-kanku kansei-ni tsutomoro koto", or "seek perfection of character". I quickly learned that this lesson is essential, to be not only a better student of karate, but also a better person. Every class Sensei Hunt and Sensei Barrett would push me to go faster, and stronger, and better, better than everyone else. Karate showed me that I can reach the top, that I could be the best and therefore should never aim for a lower standard. I've have often been told that I train significantly stronger and faster than others around me, and I make a good classmate to train next to, because the simple vibe and energy I give each ki-aye, encourages the others around me to go as fast and as strong. This translated into school, where I felt I could be better than everyone else if I wanted to, I just needed to put my energies toward it. Today I am within the top six in my class of three-hundred tenth graders, and a frequent mentor to my classmates.

"Humans are known to be social creatures." – I know this to be true from ecology classes, but I never explored the true benefits of talking with, and learning from other people around me as yet another resource to perfect myself. Sparring exercise, partner work, and even simple line work allowed me to bond and connect with my fellow classmates and their own reservoir of knowledge. The intelligent conversations that I could have with people who shared an interest in martial arts stood to show that others have minds and opinions of their own. I truly believe that taking private karate lessons would not make me better at my techniques as opposed to a class setting. We may not get specific and individual corrections, but we don't have to. Everyone makes a different kind of mistake, because everyone's execution of technique is not similar. Yet by listening and observing other's mistakes and corrections, you can make the same correction in

your own techniques, and if nothing else, learn what others do wrong and use it against them. A privately tutored student would not be so successful in tournament for this reason, because he has only two perspectives on a technique: his Sensei's and his own. Similarly, privately schooled students come into college life and are absolutely bewildered because they have no experience learning from several different viewpoints as a publicly-schooled student has had. To be a social person, one has to be able to communicate with all kinds of people and appreciate all views. Karate taught me to do this.

Before Karate influenced my life, I was also a very aloof boy. I liked to stay in my own world and focus my energies inwardly. This also contributed to my shyness, and lack of social interactions. But as a student of karate, you are quickly taught to be vigilant of your surroundings and your opponent. Perhaps the most interesting exercise that emphasized this was sparring while chatting. The idea was to have a normal fluid conversation about a topic completely unrelated to karate. The catch – the conversation must be had while slow-free sparring with your opponent, watching carefully to not get hit or make contact with the other person, but at the same time be able to participate in the conversation without wavering. This skill of awareness is essential in everyday life. No one spoon-feeds information to you whenever you want it. For example, in school setting even moving from point A to point B, you must be attentive of where you are going. Perhaps you accidentally bumped into someone having a bad day and he's walking towards you for revenge from the other hall. Maybe someone left their book in the middle of the hall and you're about to trip on it. Perhaps you were so busy catching up with your friend, you forgot class was supposed to meet on the other side of the school and now you can't possibly get there in time. In karate and real life, analyzing several pieces of information at once is a key skill to staying alive, and indeed an extremely important connection between the two.

By the influence of karate I am no longer as vulnerable or as thoughtless as I was. For example, after a hot day at the Central dojo, Sensei Hunt took me out for a slurpee. Before opening the car however, he told me that the part of town we were in wasn't the safest. I was told to be on the lookout, walk with confidence, and keep an intimidating gaze, so that anyone who might have the intention to bother us will think twice. Indeed this also represents yet another life lesson that came from karate. Proper intent is an important factor of karate, especially in kumite because it clearly displays the power and focus in one's technique. On the same note, when one goes for a job interview, or to confront someone being difficult, or even leading a project team, one needs to be confident and "have a presence" as Sensei may have called it. It shows others that you are in control, that you are your own person, and maybe someone they have to deal with. This type of attitude was definitely not part of my demeanor before studying karate.

Awareness of one's surrounding should not mean that he must stop and stare at them forgetting what he needs to be doing. In the contrast, we also train to direct all focus where it needs to be while a technique. I had to learn this the hard way. I remember distinctly an exercise I was put through one Tuesday night in Sensei Hunt's class. He asked me to stand in the center of dojo and let the rest of the class surround me and attempt to distract me from doing the kata

Basai-dai. Every mistake equated to ten laps around the dojo. That experience challenged me to block out all the sensory data that my eyes and ears were collecting to throw me off, and focus solely on the kata. In our daily lives we face similar distractions whether it be an outing with friends or a rich, inviting cheesecake in the fridge that pull us away from our set goals of maybe studying for a test or sticking to a healthy diet. In this regard, karate has taught me discipline, to focus on the goal and to ignore the distractions.

Karate has even been partially responsible in developing in me the will to learn and explore. My Senseis, even as extremely experienced black belts who have trained under many martial artists, and have gained immense knowledge, still believe they are nowhere near masters. In fact when asked if I ever want to be a karate “master”, I respond “it’s impossible”. There is always something to learn, something to perfect, something to discover in karate. No person can be totally perfect all the time or even part of the time, because there are simply too many facets to perfection. However, I have learned one should still strive to be perfect through karate. For example, early in my training, I had no idea what body connection meant, or how it could relate to a technique. I learned later on that body connection is essential to delivering the full effectiveness of a technique. I’m still no expert in “body connection”, in fact I have trouble applying it at times. But I have noticed how good body connection aids in the balance and quickness of the technique, or how better connection allows you to brace yourself from the ground itself, especially in techniques such as the gyaku-zuke. More discoveries lead to more questions, more answers, more awareness, and more knowledge to share with others. If one looks at the graph of human knowledge, it is expanding at an exponential rate and doesn’t show any sign of stopping. This proves that there is always something to learn from karate, my Senseis, my classmates and life. By acquiring the rank shodan, I won’t have proved I know everything there is to know, I will only show that I am ready to learn more than ever before, and honestly, I can hardly wait.