

Why Do You Do Karate?

By Kris Chapman

Ask a beginner why they have taken up karate and usually their answer is pretty clear: 'I wanted to learn some self-defence' or 'I wanted to get a bit fitter and karate looked interesting.' Nothing esoteric, no grand claims about trying to become a better person through the art of karate – people's entry into the world of karate usually has more immediate goals than a life-long commitment to training the body and mind on the dojo floor. Fourteen years ago, when I started, it was simply because a friend asked me to come along and have a go. Why then, all these years later, do I continue to submit myself to the discipline of the dojo several times a week? I am sure that this is a question that most long-term practitioners ask themselves at some stage when they are thinking about their practice. 'Why do I do karate?' If you think about it, you will realise that it is a harder question to answer than it first appears, especially since your response has most likely changed over time. Here, I describe some of the best answers that I have heard from sensei both in the UK and in Japan who have had a lot more experience than I have. I hope you find their answers and insights interesting. Even if you disagree with their perspectives, the good thing about the question 'Why do you do karate?' is that there is no wrong answer.

Different dojo clearly have different emphases – some instructors push their students to enter competitions, others focus on the effectiveness of how karate would work 'on the street'; there are also clubs which concentrate on gradings, and yet more in which training is done with the simple goal of technical improvement. Despite these different approaches, I have been struck by the similarity of answers given by the various instructors to whom I have asked the question: 'Why do you do karate?' There seems to be a consensus that it is not possible to distil their motivations to any single rationale, that it is just part of what they do. Sensei Paul Dempsey (6th dan JKA), my instructor for four years at St. Andrews University offered the following insight during an interview conducted in 1997: 'It's like saying "Why do you do karate?" I don't know why I do karate; it's just **do**. Why do you eat, why do you drink, you know? You have to.' Three years later, I found myself training in a suburban dojo in Tokyo under the guidance of Ota Katsunobu sensei (5th dan JKA) [a pseudonym]. During an interview for my anthropological fieldwork, Ota sensei offered a similarly emotive reflection on the meaning of karate in his life (my translation): 'Karate is like breathing for me. It's my food. So it's not something special [to me], it's myself.' More recently I trained with sensei Slater Williams (6th dan in the English

Shotokan Academy), whose response to the question of why he did karate was one of the best and most concise explanations I have heard of the indeterminate bond that most long-term practitioners have with their training: 'It becomes part of your core identity.'

There are always short-term goals to aspire to in karate such as gradings or competitions, but for most people, especially those who have made a lifelong commitment to training, such matters are not the ultimate aim of their karate training. People come to karate for whatever reasons but as the comments by the instructors I have mentioned above show, there is a point when these initial reasons for training are left behind and karate becomes part of your identity. Maybe this is what is meant by practising karate as a 'way' rather than just as a pastime or hobby? I think so. One of the most interesting reflections I have heard on this issue was by an old priest during the 'Coming of Age' day celebrations at a Zen monastery in Kawasaki prefecture in Tokyo.

One of the more idiosyncratic traditions of the Tokyo dojo where I trained between October 2000 and March 2002 took place annually on the second Monday of the New Year. '*Seijin no Hi*' is the day on which 20 year-old youths celebrate their 'Coming of Age' with civil ceremonies being held in celebration throughout Japan. Despite many of us being considerably older than 20 years of age, because Ota sensei was an 'old boy' of the local university, he and his students were invited to join the university karate club for a trip to the local Zen temple. Traditionally, the group of students and guests run the twenty kilometres from the university club to the temple along the streets of Tokyo. I had been told that this mini-marathon was to be run barefoot on the tarmac of the local roads. In anticipation of this, not being sure I could last out twenty kilometres of barefoot running, I decided that a week before the event I should do some practice: jogging without shoes around the streets of Soshigaya, the suburban neighbourhood where I lived. After about 30 minutes of running I figured that I could probably last the couple of hours or so that it would take to run to the temple; however, to my dismay, on returning home I discovered that my feet had been ripped to shreds by the grit of the tarmac roads. When I told my *senpai* the night before the temple run that I had injured my feet practising and that I didn't think I could run without shoes, he couldn't help but chuckle as he told me that it was a stupid idea to practise beforehand. The gods must have been looking after me though, as during the night the first snow of the year fell on Tokyo – this meant that the run was cancelled and that the students and their guests were all driven to the temple in coaches. I did, however, discover the pleasures of barefoot road-running the following year (although to my surprise only the men from the dojo ran without shoes, the students were all allowed to wear trainers).

After arriving, the students and their guests were given a short guided tour of the various temple buildings, followed by a rather bland and Spartan meal at the monks' canteen. Following the meal, we were all led into a large *tatami*-matted room and were soon greeted by a senior priest who in his youth had graduated from the same university as the 20 year-olds sitting on the floor at his feet.

The priest talked at length about his entry to the temple as a young man and the austere life he had to endure, getting up at 4am only to retire to bed at 10pm after several long sessions of meditation. My Japanese was not good enough to understand everything, but I could get the gist of most of the things he talked about. At one point however, the old priest stopped talking and directly addressed three of the 20 year-olds sitting in the front row. 'What do you do karate for?' he asked. Clearly embarrassed and shocked at having been asked a question, the first boy was left speechless. So the priest turned to the boy next to him and said 'and you?' His reply was 'self-defence' (*jiei*). The elderly priest also asked the girl sitting at the boy's side, she replied 'Etiquette' (*reigi*). This answer in itself is interesting, as I do not think that many people would say that they do karate to learn etiquette in the UK. Her answer perhaps reflects the view of karate in Japan as one of the traditional arts (*do*), which includes not only martial arts (*budo*) but also other traditional activities that train self-discipline and respect such as the tea ceremony (*sado*) and calligraphy (*shodo*).

Even more intriguing than the students' answers, however, was the reaction of the priest. He stood there pondering the responses for a moment before he welcomed the students' answers and offered his own perspective. 'You should do karate for the sake of karate' (*'Karate no tame ni karate ga yarun desu'*) he pronounced. 'If you do karate for its own sake,' he continued, 'then the other things such as self-defence and etiquette will follow.' I was immediately struck by the simple clarity of the monk's statement. Doing karate for its own sake, for the enjoyment of training itself - this is what the instructors I have mentioned all expressed, and do, in their own way. Thinking about this, and about the comments of my sensei, I realise that whatever the short-term goals of training are (such as those provided by grading), there is a larger, more all-encompassing aim that does not have an end, that can be achieved every time you step on the dojo floor – to do karate because you enjoy karate.

(Approximately 1500 words)