

“TRAINING FOR LIFE”

TRADITIONAL KARATE-DO TRAINING IN THE MODERN WORLD

The “traditional” or “classical” training in many Japanese martial and cultural disciplines are often identified as “-do” forms of the activity (karate-do, judo, aikido, kyudo, etc.), and are thus distinguished from the practice of mere sport or entertainment activities. The suffix “-do” indicates dedication to the activity as a comprehensive “way” or “path” for student and teacher alike to refine and integrate their personal character, relationship to society, and to the world in general in positive and constructive ways. Karate-do, as taught in the Washington Karate Association, exemplifies this classical training strategy. No one can dispute the physical and psychological benefits of regular, vigorous physical exercise. However, in addition to the physical exercise aspects, traditional Karate-do training also develops the student’s character to be strong and compassionate, instilling a commitment to achieving personal excellence in all facets of life. This paper explores the modern scientific research that validates this centuries-old methodology. It is a matter of demonstrated scientific fact that the Washington Karate Association’s “traditional” approach to instruction in Karate-do does exactly what it is supposed to do: empower the student to be an “excellent” person in every sense of the word.

There are also many purely cultural activities, such as tea ceremony, painting, and flower arranging that appear to be “refined” and which most would agree are probably enriching for the human spirit. Karate-do is a martial art and it is not so clear how, or why, learning lethal self defense techniques develops a compassionate, grounded personality with a high level of social responsibility. It is a core value in the art that a traditional Karate school, or “dojo”, is intentionally and ultimately dedicated to improving the characters and humanity of its students. This focus is readily confirmed by the many karate instructors who have young students with various attention and emotional disorders referred to them by counselors and medical professionals. When asked, these learned professionals will usually point to the “structured activity” as being therapeutic. However, this easy and obvious answer begs the question of “Why?” There are many “structured activities” in life, including regular school routines, and extracurricular sports activities, which are obviously inadequate to address these individuals’ needs. What makes the difference?

The fact is that traditional Karate-do is not simply learning how to kick and punch effectively. Modern research into brain development and functioning demonstrates that the structure of traditional Karate-do training conforms very closely to current psychological theories for the development of a “resilient” character. The classical dojo experience intentionally grows a personality that is not only strong and resilient, but compassionate and ethical. It would be grossly irresponsible for Karate-do instructors to develop deadly-effective fighters, and then allow them to mix into society without a

corresponding balance of patience and empathy for others. There are three components to consider in such character development: resilience, compassion, and a commitment to excellence. The proven success of the Washington Karate Association in developing and supporting high-functioning, successful women and men for over 40 years confirms the value of the program for students of all ages. This has been demonstrated over time and is no accident!

1. THE RESILIENT CHARACTER

“7 times down; 8 times up” – Karate Proverb

“You must never quit.”- US Army *“Battlemind for Warriors”*

What, then, is a “resilient” personality? Resilience is described as a process of, a capacity for, or an outcome of, a person’s successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances. A resilient character demonstrates a successful adaptation in context of significant threats to development. Resilience has also been described as the capability to cope successfully in the face of change, adversity or risk. Significantly, this capability can be trained, changes over time and is enhanced by protective factors in the individual and environment. The personality characteristic of resilience can also be understood as being mentally “tough”, but the term “toughness” includes a component of rigidity that is quite different from “resilience.” The resilient person may bend, but does not break in the face of adversity. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity, without being overcome and overwhelmed by negative circumstances. Resilient people are not only survivors, they are winners.

Recognized by the U.S. Army in its training, resilience is termed *“Battlemind”* and defined as *“A Warrior’s inner strength to face adversity, fear and hardship during combat with confidence and resolution. It is the will to persevere and win.”*

It is important to realize that developing resilience is a complex and interactive process. It is “fluid over time” and is not automatically kept once achieved. Just because a person has developed resilience in one area of life does not necessarily mean that the capability will function in other areas. Like any other “learned” behavior, resilience must be practiced to maintain competence.

The theory and model for this type of high-level personal functioning has been developed from studies of abused and neglected children, but have been validated for all stages of life. The concept is not new, but has been refined over the past several decades. It is since that 1990’s that brain scan technology has allowed objective validation of the physical effects of stress and an individual’s adaptive behaviors to deal with that stress. These advances allowed the development of a scientific model that can be replicated and repeated. The most basic finding is that, while all human behavior may be based in genetics or biology, individual behavior is nevertheless profoundly affected by

environmental factors. A person's character is determined not by "nature" or by "nurture", but by an ongoing and dynamic combination of both. An experienced Sensei, or teacher, of classical Karate-do varies the training experience slightly to accommodate an individual student's needs, but stays within the overall methodology to get to this result.

While the development of the theory of "resilience" has evolved over time, there is common agreement that resilience cannot exist in the absence of adversity. For students of Karate-do, this validates the rigorous and intentionally stressful nature of training. A Karate program which is "easy, safe, and fun" may be entertaining and recreational, but it simply will not contribute to the development of resilience in the student. Prolonged exposure to unpredictable, severe stress leads to vulnerability and a "victim" attitude; to develop resilience, authentic stress has to be present, but in predictable forms and moderate, manageable amounts. The traditional Karate-do training methodology is ideally suited for this process. The stress, challenge, and accomplishment involved in the development of a Karate student are all very real, but also predictable and attainable.

The study of Karate-do is challenging for any level of student, beginner or expert. The dojo environment and the level of physical activity are stressful in and of themselves; each class is a challenge to perform the techniques to the best of the student's ability. The practice is "hard" and "hurts" and is often "not fun". However, the beginning student is not alone in the experience. Whether child or adult, the beginner student is taking the class along with more experienced students who are expected to perform the techniques at even higher levels and even greater energy. The more advanced students are modeling the necessary energy and tenacity to the beginner, so he or she never feels "alone" with their discomfort. With the instructor's encouragement, all of the students in the class strive for a "personal best" in terms of effort and intensity in every class. In addition to the stress of the practice itself are added the stress from sparring practice, from performing kata forms individually in front of an audience, and from participating in belt rank promotion testing. A belt rank test is an excellent source of authentic stress for a student, since he or she is required to perform by themselves, at their highest level, while being judged by their Sensei and other black belts. These challenges are presented in predictable forms, in a supportive but very demanding environment. The reality is that there is very little "real" physical danger to the student; there may be "black and blue" marks from sparring, but serious injuries are almost unheard of. The mental stressors, such as fear of failure, embarrassment, and fear of criticism, are also significant and real.

The challenge to perform at high levels and achieve "black belt" expertise provides the goal and the reward for consistent practice. As will be noted below, one does not achieve a black belt without demonstrating an attitude of compassion towards junior students. In this way, the more advanced students assume responsibility for the safety of the less experienced, so that both can practice with full intensity but with limited risk.

All these challenges are intentionally specific to the level of the student. For example, the initial expectations for a beginner are to learn and demonstrate the most fundamental concepts and techniques. This task is not only achievable with consistent practice but the

beginner can see that these basic techniques are the foundation for future development. In most classes, each student practices standing basics together regardless of whether they are the newest white belt or the most experienced black belt. For the beginner, this validates the importance of a strong work ethic, which is shown by continued practice of the basic techniques by the expert students.

As the student develops, the expectations increase as well. Not only in the context of skill at performing technique, but also in terms of emotional maturity. The student's work ethic and attitudes toward the practice, toward peers, and especially toward less experienced students, is closely monitored. Advancement through the belt "ranks" is always conditioned upon demonstrated development of attitude and personality to go with the development of physical skills. Black belt expert-level practitioners are expected to be the most controlled, courteous and considerate of all, an example to all those who aspire to reach that level. Bullies do not last long in the training; they cannot tolerate the demand for discipline.

The traditional Karate-do instructor does not develop a student by holding their hand and telling them how wonderful they are doing. Rather, the instructor repeatedly points out what still needs to be corrected and improved within the student's experience and capabilities. Since "perfection" is an impossible standard, it is never achieved. However, the tenacious pursuit of that goal in the company of like-minded persons allows the development of a winning attitude in every aspect of the student's experience.

The California Department of Education has identified three main considerations in the development of resilience: a caring relationship, high expectations, and meaningful participation. Each of these factors is an integral part of traditional Karate-do training.

1. "Caring Relationships" are defined as supportive connections to others, having a person who is "there" and who listens non-judgmentally. A community mentor is an important person to provide such a relationship. The Karate sensei is such a positive influence, evaluating without making moral judgments while constantly encouraging the student's development. The sensei is demanding of the student's best efforts; nothing less will do. This contributes to the satisfaction the student feels when a new level of proficiency is attained. Traditional Karate instructors will often comment that in addition to being martial arts instructors, they are also called on to be counselors, therapists, and personal advisors. This is because the traditional sensei is truly interested in how the student is dealing with life outside the dojo...traditional karate-do practice does not stop when the student steps out the door. The students respond to this genuine interest in their well-being, and the dojo becomes a supportive and positive "family" of seniors and juniors, all pursuing the path of Karate.

2. "High Expectations" are defined as the consistent communication of messages that the student can and will succeed, a belief in the student's innate resilience, and the provision of guidance that is personally-centered and strengths-focused. Much of the communication in the Karate dojo is non-verbal, which is the most effective way to communicate. Students remember what they see more than what they are told. Not only

does the sensei consistently focus on improvement and achievement, but the student can see in the more advanced students that the expectation is realistic. After all, the black belts were once beginners themselves and have developed their skills through exactly the same process. The difference is the development of correct work ethics and time spent on the practice floor. A student may quit or drop out of the practice for personal reasons, but a sensei will not expel a student who is trying their best, even when it takes a long, long time to succeed.

3. “Meaningful Participation” is defined as the involvement of the student in relevant, engaging and interesting activities and having the opportunities for responsibility and contribution. The practice of traditional Karate-do is engaging and interesting on many levels; for exercise and health, for sport, for personal development, and for its philosophy. It can be enjoyed for any one or more of these aspects of the art. As a student in a traditional Karate dojo, the karate-ka becomes a part of the “sempai-kohai” network. This is a set of interlocking responsibilities towards those who are senior to the student, as well as to those who are junior. The sempai always has a responsibility for the safety and development of the junior kohai. This relationship and corresponding expectations have a real function in the dojo for the well-being of all the students. Everyone participates; everyone contributes.

In addition, positive peer influence is a powerful developmental force. Peer influence is most often interpreted negatively, such as in peer pressure to engage in health-risk behaviors such as smoking, drinking, etc. However, resilience research has also documented the positive power of peers. This is seen through supportive friendships and positive peer role models—critical protective factors in the lives of children and youth. Younger Karate students quickly develop fast friendships and friendly rivalries within the dojo. By definition, students who continue their practice for months and years are dedicated to the values of Karate-do. They are high-achievers in their own lives, and provide excellent peer influence to and for newer students. This is proven by the student who have grown up in the Washington Karate Association environment and have become successful contributors to society, continuously improving themselves and becoming scientists, doctors, engineers, attorneys, etc.

It is clear that traditional Karate dojo training provides the authentic stress, authentic challenge, and authentic achievement necessary to train a resilient mind. These factors are provided in a supportive environment where the stresses are well-defined and manageable with effort. It is an ideal environment for developing the character “to persevere and win!”

2. COMPASSION

“There is no first attack in Karate” - Funakoshi

“Do not harbor sinister intentions” - Mushashi

Traditional Karate-do training is inseparably connected with the compassion of Zen Buddhism that exists within the code of Bushido. Japanese *bushi-do* (the way of the warrior knight) is a set of ethical canons to define the correct conduct and character traits expected from the samurai warriors of feudal Japan. This Way is part and parcel of the Way of Karate.

The fundamental principles are really quite simple; the more you practice the Way of Karate, the more proficient you become. However, just because the principles are simple does not mean they are easy. This elementary concept is not limited to the physical. Karate-do includes, and requires, the regular practice of humility and compassion.

This writing makes no effort to “explain” Zen as part of the martial arts. That worthy effort has been attempted by philosophers and teachers for centuries. This discussion is limited to the practical expressions of the Zen mind in traditional Karate-do training. The practice of Karate-do, like Zen, is a path...not a destination. Both are strict and demanding disciplines that develop a heightened sensitivity to the activities of everyday life. Over time, the individual Karate student realizes that the Way is a means to reach a goal, but that he or she is entirely free to choose the destination of their particular path. While this ability is empowering, it also imposes the burden of individual responsibility for choices. Zen and bushido set up the framework to instill real meaning into those choices, as opposed to an immature and self-centered focus.

The Zen included in Karate-do is a philosophy and methodology of willpower; the tenacious development of an iron will and an indomitable spirit. However, that spirit is tempered by the Zen concepts of connectedness and responsibility in society, resulting in a truly compassionate spirit.

The Zen practice in Karate-do is active, not passive. It is moving meditation, when the “mind” has to be still and get out of the way of the practice. The result is to develop an internalized level of confidence and skill that does not have to be advertised to the world. When you truly are centered, confident, relaxed and entirely competent to meet a challenge, then you do not need to pick a fight to “prove” it. The Zen trained karate practitioner does not provoke aggression, nor does he or she seek it out. The karate-ka merely responds to the threat presented in an entirely defensive, but decisive way.

The compassion of Zen involves rejoicing when something happens to you *exactly* as you would if it happened to someone else, and sorrowing under another’s sorrow no less than if it had happened to you. However, all these emotional states are considered neutrally and impartially, without being “hooked” and dragged along another’s emotional path. Each black belt has gone through the trials and tribulations of each challenge from the

beginning of their own training. As needed, the Sensei will remind them that the issues faced by each beginner are a reminder of their own past and the need to assist others along the path, just as the black belts were helped along when they began their studies.

The traditional Zen concept of compassion tracks closely with the modern studies of empathy. Empathy is the term applied in psychology to an individual's capability to share another person's emotions and feelings. One who is completely without empathy for others is known as a psychopath, or anti-social personality. The term defines a personality disorder characterized by amorality and lack of affect; a person capable of violent acts without guilt feelings.

As with resilience, modern brain imaging studies shows a neurological basis for the difference. The "feeling" of empathy is a biological brain function. A functional MRI study conducted by the University of Chicago has demonstrated that youth with aggressive conduct disorder (who have psychopathic tendencies) have a different brain response when confronted with empathy-eliciting stimuli. In the study, researchers compared 16- to 18-year-old boys with aggressive conduct disorder to a control group of adolescent boys with no unusual signs of aggression. The boys with the conduct disorder had exhibited disruptive behavior such as starting a fight, using a weapon and stealing after confronting a victim. The youth were tested with MRI while looking at video clips in which people endured pain accidentally, such as when a heavy bowl was dropped on their hands, and intentionally, such as when a person stepped on another's foot. Results show that the aggressive youth activated the neural circuits underpinning pain processing to the same extent and, in some cases, even more so than the control participants without conduct disorder. However, aggressive adolescents showed a specific and very strong activation of an area of the brain that responds to feeling rewarded when watching pain inflicted on others, which suggested that they enjoyed watching pain. Unlike the control group, the youth with conduct disorder did not activate the area of the brain involved in self-regulation and moral reasoning.

Experimental evidence has shown that empathy does indeed lead to genuinely altruistic motivation rather than to engage in helping behavior because of predominantly egoistic motivations. Again, this parallels the Zen ideals of compassion, and the bushido mandates to the samurai to use their "life and death" power for the greater benefit of society, rather than for selfish reasons.

Significantly, as with resilience, the process of empathy can be trained and developed. Training in empathy is now considered a priority in business management. "Most modern gurus in the areas of communications, management and self-development refer in one way or another to the importance of empathy - really understanding the other person's position and feelings. Being able to 'step back', and achieve a detachment from our own emotions, is essential for effective, constructive relationships. Whether for selling, customer retention, handling complaints, or diffusing conflict, empathy helps." The business emphasis on empathy may not be so altruistic, but it does reinforce the fact that it is a positive learned skill that has broad application through a practitioner's life, not just in the Karate dojo.

3. EXCELLENCE

“Do not be negligent, even in trifling matters” – Mushashi

“My goal is to play each game as close to perfection as is humanly possible” – Ichiro

It is an obvious truth that being a high achiever in any field is not “normal.” Outstanding performance is far above the average/normal level...in education the grade of “C” is average, “B” is above the average, and an “A” is a level of excellence. There are similar recognitions in the arts, where the title of virtuoso or master is acknowledgement that one possesses consummate skill. In sport, the Olympic gold medal or a World Championship title is the prize for outstanding achievement. Unfortunately, while every student wants to receive an “A”, or every athlete desires to win an Olympic gold medal, most will simply not take any real steps to achieve the honor. For many persons still in school, just “passing” or “getting by” is the limit of their ambition. In sport, most individuals are happy to be “recreational” or “weekend” athletes, without any real skill.

However, in the martial arts and Karate-do, the express challenge to the student is to use the training to “polish their path” in life, whatever that may be. The training is beneficial at any level of commitment, but the traditional dojo training is designed to perfect the character of the students and instructors. Karate is not learned in ten easy lessons...much to the dismay of the casual student who expects to be proficient in a matter of weeks. A traditional dojo will include students who have been practicing intently for decades, and still do not feel that they have even partially mastered the art.

This emphasis in traditional Karate-do training is the most obvious, since the Sensei requires the student to pay attention to the smallest details of technique and execution. The standard is perfection; the challenge to the student is to see just how close they can come to that standard.

A commitment to personal excellence is also something that can be developed and trained, in much the same way as resilience and empathy. The Karate-do training protocols provide small, manageable challenges to beginners with limited skill sets, which advance to ever more problematic activities, requiring much more complex skills. The whole belt ranking system provides an appropriate challenge/reward model to encourage not only technical competence, but the student’s ability to manage and overcome the anxiety associated with the testing process. Traditional Karate-do includes, but does not emphasize, tournament competition as a part of the learning process and not as a goal of the training. By way of example, in a “modern” or “sport” karate school, the goal is to produce tournament champions. In a traditional school, whether or not a student is a tournament champion is secondary to how diligently they are training in the “way” of Karate-do and applying its principles in their lives. The champions who are traditionally trained are almost always highly competent in the art, and therefore win at tournaments, but are also high achievers in school, their professions, and in society at large.

The study of Karate-do is disciplined, rigorous, and purposely challenging on physical and emotional levels. It is also structured so that “excellence” or “success” are a result of sustained effort as opposed to athletic talent!

Once again, traditional Karate-do is validated by modern studies in optimal performance. What factors regarding excellence have been identified by psychological studies? The most important factor for developing expertise in any endeavor is sustained, interested practice to master achievable but difficult skills. As those skills are truly internalized, the level of anxiety associated with performance decreases and the student enters into “the zone” or “flow state” in which very high level performance is “natural”. At the very highest levels of sport, where thousandths of a second may be the difference between winning and losing, the athlete simply cannot be “thinking” about performance. In the time it takes to think about the next move, the match or race is already lost. This sport model approximates the “mindless” state of a martial artist facing a life or death confrontation. When your life is on the line, survival depends on your ability to react quickly and appropriately to the threat that actually presents itself...not what you “think” might possibly happen and what you “think” should be the best reaction. Karate phrases such as having “mind like a moon in the water” refer to this principle.

The “expert” is someone who has practiced their skill to the point where responses are “chunked” or “clustered” based on past experience with similar situations, to respond appropriately to new challenges without conscious effort. While expertise is being developed, the problems presented to the student...in this case basic techniques, kata, and sparring challenges, are carefully built on past experience and are difficult (but not impossible) to solve.

Studies have shown that with many disciplines, the progress of a student is “one way” and that once a skill or technique has been learned, the student becomes bored with repetition of that skill or technique. This leads to failure at more advanced skills, disappointment, and dropping out of the activity. Traditional Karate-do solves this issue by its relentless focus on the pursuit of perfection in each and every stance and technique in the art. No matter how long or how diligently one has studied the art, there is always room for refinement and improvement.

A student or martial artist does not achieve this elevated level of performance simply by “wanting it” or by wishful thinking. The Karate-do sensei and the dojo experience extend the opportunity to reach these heights to any student, young or old, and also provide the challenge, encouragement, and feedback to achieve their personal optimal performance. In fact, the traditional Karate-do sensei insists on it; nothing less will do.

4. CONCLUSION

“Life should be led like a cavalry charge!” – Theodore Roosevelt

“Never look back. Somethin' might be gainin' on ya'.” - Satchel Paige

One of the insights of modern studies on resilience and peak performance is that sustained high achievement can be trained; the converse finding is that apathy, boredom and anxiety are also trained responses. While every life is different, each person makes choices which have long-term consequences for good or ill. If one embarks on an ocean voyage with a compass that is only very slightly off, the destination that is a thousand miles away will be missed by a huge margin...and good intentions will not correct the result!

Traditional Karate-do serves as the “true” compass that can get lives off to a good start, and correct “course deviations” that have already taken place. If one is given a chance to become a strong, successful, and compassionate person, all at the same time, then who would not take the opportunity? What parent would not want their child to become such a person?

Those who practice traditional Karate-do know very well that “It works!” Modern scientific studies have validated the centuries-old methods of instruction. The Way of Karate requires that every facet of the practitioner’s life be polished to perfection. What could be more valuable, or more desirable? The words of President Theodore Roosevelt and Satchel Paige are especially applicable to the life of a contemporary martial artist: Live with total commitment, attack each challenge in your life without holding anything back, and know in your heart that your efforts cannot fail. This also the message of traditional Karate-do to our modern society: “Now, you must train harder!”

Respectfully submitted this 4th day of February, 2010.

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6th. Dan

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