

What Does Karate Mean to Me

by Ilan Goldfarb

To me, Karate is a way of life. It is a teaching of a way to live with confidence and humility. Karate is training for the body, the mind and the spirit. Karate has taught me determination and how to use my imagination. Karate is also a way of expressing myself. All of these things that Karate teaches has made me a better person.

At the beginning of this summer, when I was just a brown belt, Saiko Shihan wanted to know when I was going to college. I had to ask my dad, who was there, and we learned it was not until September. Saiko Shihan counted out the months and said he could make me a black belt if I really worked hard before I went away to college. I had really wanted to be a black belt before I started college, but I had resigned myself to realize that was not going to happen. But suddenly I was getting a chance to do it. I did not have to think about it. I immediately said Osu! (meaning yes) and my summer was set. I would do nothing but take care of the 13 puppies that I allowed to happen and train my body and mind to become a black belt. However, I did not think I would be able to take the black belt promotion by the end of the summer, and I am thankful that Saiko Shihan had more confidence in me that I did.

For the first time Karate became my life, it took over my mind and imagination. I thought about Karate when I woke up, when I ate, when I took care of the puppies, when I exercised and even when I slept, I dreamed about Karate. I walked around the house imagining I was fighting. I punched, ducked, blocked and kicked. Everybody thought I was crazy. I practiced Katas for hours on the matt we set up in the basement. And, I practiced Katas in my favorite place – the pool. The resistance of the water slowed down my movements regardless of how forceful I was. But, when I practiced the same Kata right after I got out of the pool, my movements were explosive. By making karate harder in the pool it came easier on the land. That is another teaching of Karate – make it harder then it comes easier.

My one on one training with Saiko Shihan was intense. I was stressed before I met with him, stressed about the thousands of mistakes I made when I trained with him and exhausted after I finished. But that stress made me deal with pressure and learn to stay calm and relaxed even though my insides were churning with stress. I did not realize it, but all that was forcing me to meet stress, deal with it and work through it to my goal. That is one of Karate’s teachings that I absorbed this summer – dealing with stress and finding the confidence to push through it.

For me, Karate is also about intense conditioning of the body, teaching it to strike, block and fighting strategies through Katas. It is about muscle memory so

the moves come instinctively, without any hesitation. When I do a Kata over and over the Karate kind of flows through me as I move through the pattern, and I can focus on using my strength and flexibility to bring intensity to the movement. I imagine my opponent during the kata, and that allows me to coordinate the timing so it looks like I am really fighting somebody as opposed to just exercising. I learned that timing is the key to fighting, but you can not have timing in a kata without imagination. Without imagination, you look like an exercising robot, that is why imagination in Kata is so important.

And Karate is also about expressing myself. Whether it is making the Kata my own through my imagination of what the opponent is doing or through Kiai. Kiai is my energy that I harbor inside and release in my own way as an expression of who I am. I used to think Kiai was kind of exercising my vocal chords, but for me it is a way of expressing my power and ability to control it. The internal Kias give me power and the loud Kias express my power. When I fight I can use Kiai to summon power, to scare an opponent or to fake out my opponent.

My ten years of Karate training and all of what I have talked about above that I learned from Karate came together in my black belt promotion. It was the hardest day of my life as well as the day I felt the most pride. I was so nervous I felt like I was going to throw up. And, when I learned I was the only one promoting and saw more black belts than I had ever seen at the Dojo, I was really

ready to go home to the puppies. But, I pulled myself together, stretched, did some breathing exercises and pretended it was just another day of training with Saiko Shihan.

Karate has taught me to focus inwardly and I used that during the promotion to block out all the black belts staring at me. I focused on Saiko Shihan's instructions and my movements. I was only able to do this because of the training I had been doing.

When I finished the Kata's and started fighting, I was exhausted. I expected to fight about five people and be done. However, nothing went as expected. Karate taught me to expect the unexpected and deal with it accordingly. I hurt my hand around the third fight. I felt a sharp pain and knew something was wrong when I could not make a fist. But, Karate gave me the confidence to focus away from the pain and push through the fighting. I expected I only had two more fights and I could handle that, I would try not to use that hand.

But, the fights kept coming and I kept pushing the pain down somewhere where it did not matter. And I fought on and on and on. When the fighting finished, I know that was the proudest day of my life. I had everything thrown against me and somehow I overcame it to finish the promotion, not when I had enough, but only when Saiko Shihan said I was done.

I felt great pride when everybody clapped for me and when they shook my hands to congratulate me; although, I had to keep pulling my hand away from those who wanted to squeeze too tight. I am most proud that I was able to push myself much further than I thought I was capable of ever going, but where Saiko Shihan knew I could go.

At the same time, Karate made me feel pride, it also taught me humility. I am humbled by the fact that Saiko Shihan knew how far I could be pushed much better than I did. When I thought I was done, somehow, he knew I had more in me. I am also humbled by the fact that there is so much I have yet to learn about Karate as well as everything else.

I really hope I am able to pass the promotion, but even if I do not, I am still very thankful to have learned that Karate has taught me to have the courage to dig deep and keep going. I am already trying to figure out how I can take a semester doing Karate.