

What is Karate and where do I see Karate in the future?

By Clive Wadham

This is a very good question, Karate is many things to many of us and few of these are common. The question “what is Karate” leads to countless others. Too many to answer in this short story. For example, is karate a sport? a martial art? or the more controversial one, is all karate good karate? We often coin the term “different is not wrong, different is just different”. My philosophy is you are training for something (I would hope) and I am not an expert in everything. Who am I to judge, to say, what you are doing is wrong. However, I do work with principles (most more scientific than philosophical) and an open mind. I see something you are doing, I ask the question, “what you are doing and why”? If you are unable to explain or the explanation has more holes than a colander, then I will question that. If not, I will most likely ask more questions and then try and understand what you have. Then comes the question, is this something I can use? And your Karate life cycle continues. We can always learn something from others, be it how to do something or even how not to do something. I find that you will never know everything and sometimes the more you train, the more likely you are to realise how much you do not actually know and how much more knowledge there is out there to learn and explore.

As I said, Karate is many things to many people. Karate to me is more of the traditional form. Groups of like minded people sharing, exploring, experimenting, and developing the art of the “empty hand”. There are no rules, no illegal techniques, only techniques that work and those that don't. The key is to find the ones that work with the least amount of thought and effort, the ones that feel most natural.

We all have two arms and two legs. Until we have five arms and six legs then the fighting arts all have a common thread. Each one has strengths and weaknesses. There is no style that is better than any other. We have striking, groundwork, throws, locks, and chokes. These are all good at incapacitating an assailant. Which one is best? It depends on your situation. It pays to be adverse to many. If you think of Karate as a toolbox and each of your techniques as a tool. You may have your favourite hammer or screwdriver. Or do you have that old rusty tool at the bottom of the box you cannot quite remember how to use. Well, practice is all about using all the tools and keeping them in good working order, ready for any job or situation.

When Karate is mentioned, there is one thing that is often missing, “do”. Once you include this Karate takes on a completely different form. What is “do”. It is a Japanese word meaning

“way” or “path”; but it does not just finish there, there is more behind that one word. It can be thought of as a journey and brings in other aspects like a person’s character and involvement in the community. As with many words once you have a literal translation, they can lose their true meaning. For example, how would you describe the Maori word “mana”, it’s difficult. But with a lifetime of culture surrounding you, you can easily look at a person and say they have “mana” and you would understand the meaning but it would be difficult to explain what that is. I digress, back on topic. When referencing “do” we get the “way” or “path”. We now have the “empty hand way” and then we are able to blend in our cultural aspect and start to look not just at the mind, body, and spirit, but also the character of the person. To me that is what “Karate do” is all about. First you start with the mind. Once you are mentally prepared you can now begin working on the body. The body is a beautiful lump of clay, yes, that is correct, a lump of clay. When you start, it has no shape or form. It is only with time and the never-ending adjustments that you transform the body into a work of art. Now we have spirit, is this something that can be taught? Or is it something that you observe and develop based on your surroundings? You often hear the term “a fighting spirit” or they have “good spirit”. Once again, this can be many things. Both being a good loser and being a good winner are spiritual characteristics that are important when it comes to being humble. The spirit in Karate is one of not giving up. Why is this so hard you say, well, if it was easy then everyone would be doing it. Never give up in the dojo or in anything in life as a wise man once said, once down, twice up.

There are people who see Karate as a sport. A sport of tournaments, competitions, medals, trophies, long waits, poor judging, good judging, terrible forms, and excellent ones. But I do see this as an important part of your Karate development. This is another tool in your toolbox. This is why cross training is an important part of your Karate development. If you look back at many of the great Karate masters they all tried different disciplines. This is a must, practising what you are bad at is essential for growth. Trying something new and working outside your comfort zone all help to build your Karate and your character.

Karate must evolve to survive, and I believe we are. We have our 12 (counting the 3 Sanchin kata as 1) fundamental kata. These do not change. The principal movements of a kata remain. The meaning behind these movements is the part that must evolve and become relevant to the generation learning, the student. The base movements of the kata must remain. A stance is a stance, a block is a block (or strike, but that is a topic for another day), and a punch (strike) is still a punch. However, how these techniques are used, that is the application of the kata movement, this is the part that must evolve and develop over time, you cannot remain in the past. Yes, our kata is the foundation of Karate, however, we have

many other training aids that help develop our kata. The sports and exercise science we have today is 10 fold over what past generations had to work with. We can use these developments to once again evolve our training and keep it interesting and engaging for all levels. Yes, we have our basics, once again these remain our foundation. Then we have moving basics. If I said do some shadow boxing, are you not just doing moving basics or are you boxing? Once again, use other disciplines to help develop your Karate. On that, why limit your scope to only the fighting arts. There are hundreds of other sports and physical activities that you can use to help improve and develop your Karate. Watch and observe. Always be on the lookout for that unique kata movement. You might see the next generation application at your local sports ground during a game of rugby.

Well as I always say, enough talking and let's get back to the dojo. Too much talking and not enough doing will not get the job done. Karate is a journey for the mind, body, and spirit, a lifelong passion of self-reflection, self-development, and social interaction. Yes, you may hear Karate is about your inner development, and yes, it is, but if you never have any other like-minded people around to help you, how would you ever get to test what you have been working on. All theory with no practice is as bad as all practice and no theory. You need a balance. I often say "oh, that looked so much better in my mind than that".