

SPORT KARATE AND THE ETHICS OF KARATE-DO

Adapted from Michael Cowie and Robert Dyson, *A Short History of Karate* (Kenkyo-ha Budo Renmei, 2012)

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'The ultimate aim of Karate lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of the participant' (Funakoshi Gichin: *Karate Do, My Way of Life* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1981), p. 85.

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The increasing popularity of 'sport' karate has had a largely deleterious effect on the conception of karate as an art or 'way' (道). Jiyu kumite (自由組手) – free or largely unregulated sparring – may or may not have something to contribute to the development of the karateka: this is a question about which opinions differ. Older teachers – Funakoshi Osensei especially – were inclined to discourage or prohibit it, largely because they saw competitiveness as undermining the very virtues of character that they wished to foster. A later, and now the predominant, view is that jiyu kumite introduces a valuable element of reality and 'pressure-testing' (耐圧試験) into karate practice. There are reasonable arguments on both sides. No one who has ever watched the full-blooded kumite of Kyokushin karateka is likely to have any doubts about the participants' courage and strength of character. It is, however, incontrovertible that the growth and popularity of jiyu kumite has contributed to the common perception of karate as a sport or game.

Part of the problem (if we are right to call it a problem) is the general failure of the 'philosophy' of karate to cross the linguistic and cultural divide between East and West. An ethical system that is to so great a degree Buddhist in essence is likely to be completely foreign to the average westerner. This is no doubt less true than it once was, but it is still true in general. All occidental karate teachers know a few words and phrases of Japanese, and many pretend to know more than they do. Few, however, take the trouble to study the Japanese language and culture in any depth. They are to that extent ill equipped to grasp and communicate the 'inner' nature of karate, and correspondingly ready to slot karate into a familiar pre-existing 'sport' framework: a framework that defines the object of the exercise as being to defeat others and go home with a trophy.

There are plenty of people now to whom the idea of karate as being anything other than a sport is unintelligible. Every instructor knows – and in many cases will pander to – students for whom kata practice is only an irritating distraction from the fun of fighting or an irksome requirement of a grading syllabus. For many contemporary karateka the only or main object of practice is to fight, to enter tournaments, to win trophies. Numerous organisations have sprung up that have as

their main or only purpose the promotion of competitive events. We suspect that it is only a matter of time before karate is accepted as an Olympic sport, as judo and taekwondo already have been.

One objection to sport karate is that habitual participation in no-contact or semi-contact fighting weakens technique because 'pulling' punches and kicks becomes established in the participants' minds as a conditioned reflex. A further objection is the standardisation and (in some cases) weakening of karate kata in order to create a repertoire of prescribed (shitei; 指定) kata that must be performed always in the same way (to make uniform judging possible), with no room for significant personal interpretation or variation.

In our context, however, a far more important point is the effect of competition on the character of the competitor. It may be true that human beings are naturally competitive animals. Nonetheless, the desire to win a karate contest is a desire to gratify the ego: to exult in a victory destitute of moral significance. Are we, then, to take seriously the maxim that "the true purpose of the art of karate is not victory or defeat but the perfection of the practitioner's character"? It is, of course, open to anyone to disagree with Funakoshi Osensei: to contend that "playing" karate is ethically no different from playing football. If we are to take his dictum seriously, however, a simple question presents itself: what, exactly, is being perfected in the character of someone so largely motivated by the desire to enlarge himself by triumphing over others? No doubt all this will seem censorious and self-righteous to some; but you either believe in the idea of karate as a "way" of self-perfection or you don't, and whether you do or don't is reflected in how you live in relation to it.