

The Nature of a Karate - Ka

By Ken Roberts



Ken Roberts has been practicing, studying, and researching karate for more than 50 years. He is an 8th Dan in Goju Ryu karate and is Chairman of Goju Ryu Karate Do New Zealand. A lifelong exponent of the Martial Arts, he is one of the foremost instructors of Karate in New Zealand and has produced numerous champions in multiple disciplines over the years. This essay was written when he was examined for his shodan (black belt) but is still relevant today.

Terry Hill

It is interesting and certainly important to any instructor, to consider the motives that cause a person to take a serious look at karate-do. It is also easy worthwhile to examine the reasons why a person either trains superficially, that is for only a relatively short period of time, or why he continues to train on a regular basis and achieves a senior belt level of skill.

The majority of potential trainees find themselves watching their first training session partly because they have had their curiosity aroused by the flamboyant and inaccurate publicity which karate-do inevitably receives. They may also be present partly because of a sincere desire to find a way by which they may be able to look after themselves should they become involved in a violent situation.

From this early stage of motivation, the potential trainee may decide that the end result appears to be worth the strenuous and repetitive training required by the instructors. He probably has concluded that karate-do is a very credulous and effective method of self-defence. A number of persons never proceed further than this preliminary viewing of a training session. These persons are not naturally very energetic or zealous people; they usually decide that karate-do is not for them and prefer to restrict their interests to some less exacting and more immediately rewarding pursuits. But the majority of persons, who view their first training session in a karate-do dojo attempt to learn this dynamic art.

During the first several weeks of training the new trainee learns numerous new techniques and his progress during that time is so evident that he has no cause for discouragement or impatience. In addition, the trainee notices a very real benefit in terms of improved physical fitness. A few other trainees find at this point that they don't adapt well to the physical and mental discipline demanded of them, and therefore drop out of training at this time.

One thing an exponent of karate-do must be able to tolerate and respond to in a favourable way, is criticism. Whether the trainee considers that the criticism is justified or not, he must accept it. This becomes quite a problem for some persons and particularly the self-confident ones, may find it difficult to do; confident persons are very rarely required to acknowledge anybody else's opinions.

The most useful and possibly the most essential characteristic that trainees should possess is patience. When progress in training appears to be very slow or non-existent, it is necessary

for the trainee to control his impatience; he should do this by persisting with regular training. He will eventually be rewarded with a noticeable improvement in some aspect of his technique, if not his very personality. The satisfaction of achieving progress in this manner is a considerable boost to morale and compensates the trainee for the hard efforts he has made. With more training a trainee learns that he gets out of his effort only that which he puts into it. There is no easy path to progress. While some trainees may, because of personal attributes, make progress more easily than others, progress only comes to those trainees who apply themselves to the tasks at hand. But there are those trainees who cannot accept this basic principle of learning – self-activity- and who are oblivious to the fact that they are the only ones to suffer if their primary thought is to complete a training session with the least amount of effort.

It also follows that in addition to the effort that must be put into training, it is equally important to train regularly. The trainee must adhere to a reasonably rigid programme in order to avoid a situation where he begins to miss training for various nebulous reasons, and with increasing frequency. Once training has been allowed to lapse for a period of weeks, it becomes increasingly difficult to resume regular training again.

To learn how to control one impatience, to accept criticism, to train in a reasonably strenuous fashion, and to train regularly, these are the important mental disciplines demanded of a karate-ka. Other aspects of discipline referred to by the Japanese as “exercising the true spirit”, involve:

1. Overcoming of discomfort and/or tiredness to the extent that the trainee is able to continue what is asked of him
2. Overcoming fear of either injury or failure so that the trainee can face adversity with determination and purpose

Anyone who has trained at different dojo under different instructors will agree that the most important influences on attendance at training and consequently those which directly affect morale are:

1. The atmosphere within the dojo
2. The training NZQA

The atmosphere within the dojo is a subtle thing when a definition is sought. Largely it is intuitively transmitted to a trainee by the way other trainees move, their level of discipline and their manner of responding to instruction. In the absence of a disciplinary atmosphere a dojo seems a lifeless place and no different than say a football gym. No matter how hard one tries it is very difficult to rouse an enthusiasm or sense of purpose.

A significant factor in the creation of a proper atmosphere in the dojo is the impression given to the trainees by the instructor. If he approaches the whole manner of training in a flippant or superficial way or does not join in with the training with his students, he is obviously going to fail to create a proper training atmosphere.

The nature of the training NZQA can affect the trainees' will to train. All training programmes must be very carefully structured. A NZQA that is excessively rigid, a military-like discipline as well as a NZQA that places too much emphasis on strenuous and monotonous physical exercise made without an essential ingredient of interesting and varied exercise, will fail to attract, and hold trainees.

This situation is usually related to the experience and seniority of the instructor. Many small dojo that do not have the benefit of an experienced instructor often fail at this juncture. There is definitely a need for strenuous exercise in all training programmes, but it is very important for the instructor to bear in mind the type and severity with which it is given to the trainees. A variety of exercises can be said to be the most essential ingredient for stimulating and keeping the trainee's interest.

One of the most interesting questions that confront the professional instructor is the one that asks why a relatively large number of graded (dan holders) either cease to train or why they only train rarely. Among the most meaningful answers are the following:

1. Competition to keep up their technical level with others of similar experience diminishes
2. They lack the confidence in their ability to progress to and attain higher levels of rank
3. If they began karate-do at a young age various domestic distractions such as career, marriage, job; are easily allowed to persuade them that they don't now have time for training

It can be said that the karate-ka who trains regularly and persistently is probably one who values the fact that physical and mental conditioning which stands him in good stead during the training is also equally present in all aspects of his daily life.