

ONE STUDENT'S LOOK AT KARATE:

A VEHICLE FOR CHANGE, A MIRROR FOR LIFE. By Jeff Hutchings.

"He who controls others may be powerful, but he who has mastered himself is mightier still."

That's a statement made by Lao Tzu, considered to be the founder of Taoism, written in the Tao Te Ching 2500 years ago. At first glance, having to read more about *mastering yourself* or the *perfection of character* in the Martial Arts may be painful, but bear with me, perhaps my take on this may be of interest to you.

Gichin Funakoshi was quoted on a number of occasions addressing the idea of the fight in karate actually being within you, and in some of his texts he stressed the value of character building and moral shaping. His thinking, quite simply put, is that karate should assist you on multi-dimensional levels, and in doing so, should help you become a better citizen of society. Nothing new to you all there. This all may sound a bit lofty for some and a bit cliché for anyone who has been around Karate for any length of time, but I think it deserves another look.

The proof is in the Dojo. A while ago I was asked why I like Karate so much and dedicated so much of my life to it. My response was quick and simple: *It's good for me. The people I train with are decent, ambitious, respectful people. Personal agendas are checked at the door.* This may sound a little naive but this has been my experience, and in fact, the whole concept of bettering yourself through Karate – that I intend to talk about here in this humble article – is also based on my experience. Karate helped me whoop my biggest opponent, and continues to help me keep it at bay. Enter generalized anxiety, the jagged kidney stone of mental and emotional unrest.

Not to drag out the description (which really defies words), or to cast a dark feel over this little article, I'll summarize recurrent anxiety and anxiety attacks as a paralyzing emotional roller coaster that can suck the life from its host, stripping away the zest for life and restricting it's victim in their ability to function normally. It's dark, relentless and scary – at least until you understand it. It's like facing Mas Oyama whilst tied to a chair.

Now enter Karate, an undertaking of dedicated, long-term physical repetition where quitting isn't only not an option, it isn't even on the table; an Art where mental clarity comes when the practitioner plows through sweaty fatigue for no reason other than to keep going.

If my anxiety was the sea I was to drown in, Karate was my lifebuoy.

There are a few notions around anxiety or nervous illness that are key to its disposal; Acceptance, Separation and Persistence. In my karate life I have learned that there are no shortcuts. You don't run away from anything in a Shotokan dojo if you truly wish to overcome it or become adept at it. Right now my nemesis is body connection. I'm not talking about making a technique look good. I am talking about the complete connection between your intention, the ground you stand on, and the body mechanics that complete a technique. Persistence in training, where you are focused on the task at hand, and approaching it from different points of view, are crucial to bringing all of this together. And as time went on I realized that as anxious and unnerved I might have been entering the dojo, there was little space for me to be obsessing with trivial or compulsive thoughts while I was working so hard on something I wanted so badly. If you've ever read anything by Robert Remington you'll know that getting it right when it comes to body mechanics like posture, alignment and torso rotation in technique is complex, and it requires an arrangement of the mental faculties to the task at hand. Therefore, I didn't have to fight to push anything from my mind, it simply happened as a matter of course as I relished practicing and absorbing karate. After all, focusing in karate isn't just a side effect. If you're doing Ippon kumite with a buddy, keeping your mind clear to anticipate the attack is the only way to ward off taking a knock...and some of these knocks are formidable.

In the dojo concentration comes in a variety of facets. I find myself focused on watching a senior belt do kata in order to pick up the subtleties that make a good kata look like moving Zen; in dojo discussions on the principle and theory of movements I am completely attuned in order not to miss a tidbit of Martial Arts insight from my Sensei; in my own kata performance I strive for Zanshin – I try to be in the moment. Clarity comes from being totally and obstinately engaged in something meaningful.

As anyone who has been gripped by anxiety knows, the long and arduous days and seasons of dealing with it and trying to cope with it leaves little separation between you and the condition itself. Anxiety becomes who you are. For a period in my life this essentially became true for me. My biggest fear was second fear, the fear of having an anxiety attack or going through a spell of heightened



Author, Jeff Hutchings with his daughter Claire.

anxiousness. The happening in life that caused or rekindled the initial anxiety response was secondary to worrying about the nervous illness catching hold and beating the daylights out of you again. But the more I trained, the more karate not only became a distraction, it became part of who I was, leaving less room for the unfounded worries and negative energy to find a foothold. I was relating in a positive way to something that was good for me.

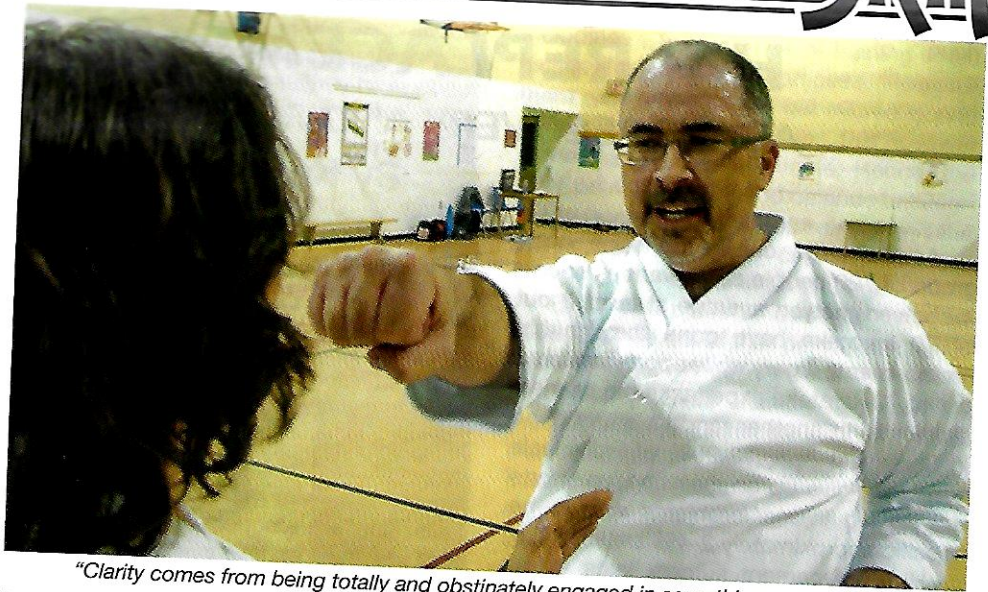
Simply going through the motions of the five Heian Kata in my basement, or alternating reverse punches on the makiwara – mindfully breathing as I went allowed for more space between the relentless thoughts, and it allowed me to relax. My karate was a volume control for the mental noise. It became a reminder that there was still a tranquil place within me if I dug deep enough. This may sound a little mystical, and I'm not saying Karate was a cure. To use the analogy of a *mind like a mill pond* when in a fight, karate allowed me to put things back into perspective, to see the bigger picture. Couple this with the excellent exercise I was getting, and life was more in balance whenever my training was on track. Even through periods of physical injury, like recovering from a sore back after a vehicle accident, I was able to continue to train. Granted, my Kata became more isometric and looked more like Tai Chi, but it still worked and its benefits were numerous.

Further to this, George Orwell said that *"Happiness can only be found in acceptance."* In my dojo, I find that the most important prerequisite for getting better is to accept where you are, especially the shortcomings. In preparation for my Shodan grading I

recall that there were some things that I wasn't comfortable with. I had a choice to make: work on the things I was already pretty good at to make them better, or put my performance at my grading aside and work on making my overall karate better. I chose the latter and accepted that there were significant inadequacies in my karate, and at the same time resolved to work with them indefinitely until they improved. Acceptance is an integral part of the martial arts; if you don't progress in a belt ranking you simply embrace it and endeavor to do better; if you meet a kata that becomes your nemesis, you don't avoid it, you simply look at it from a new perspective and work under the guidance of Sensei and Sempai to become more adept. Essentially, you stand back and look at it with an open mind. Once again, my karate became a metaphor for my life.

If I was going to live a full life, I'd had to do it alongside my anxiety – at least for now. I'd learn to accept the waves of nervousness and discomfort, seeing it for what it really was: a physical reaction to my mind's engrained yet unfounded messages. There was a time when I'd unwisely run from a pending anxiety attack, feeling somehow that if I shook myself or scrambled to think different thoughts it might dissipate. Of course, oftentimes when you resist it becomes stronger, and I eventually learned to let the thoughts and the associated feelings come and go (I love the opening of Kanku Dai as it has real meaning for me in this respect). I guess like the hooking block, I was accepting the opponent's energy only to turn it back to him, using it to my advantage.

Fundamentally, I think that my persistence in my Karate, which translates to some components of life, comes from believing in it. The Sensei and Sempai in my dojo are from the lineage of Matasami



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Tsuruoka, Yutaka Katsumata and Hidetaka Nishiyama, all of whom have contributed to a rock-solid foundation for the Art.

We train in the principles as much as in techniques and there is an ongoing zealotness to learn and understand karate. My Sensei is forty years into his karate life and he is still as enthusiastic as ever and is still on the path to discovery – that's key. Kata, Kihon and Kumite are the primary ingredients in my dojo, and there is nothing pretentious about the training. We are a group of various ranks, all simply students of a fascinating Art, striving to get better than ourselves. Each person in a dojo is there for a different reason, I believe. I'm there because I enjoy it, it keeps me moving, it keeps me connected with salt-of-the-earth people, and it just so happens that it benefits me immensely on the level of mind.

When my father signed me up for karate classes as a kid I had no idea what it was really all about. His hope was that it would assist with my self-esteem and get me

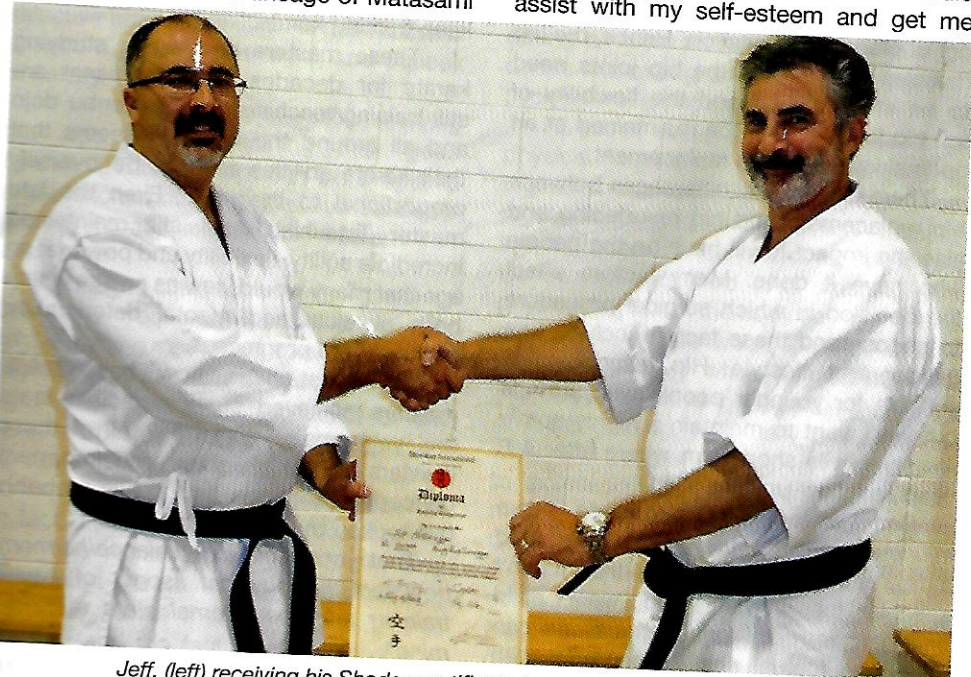
involved in something where respect was demanded and hard work was rewarded. Even back then there was something about karate that got hold of me. We weren't breaking boards or learning the flashy modern-day techniques, and there was no instant gratification. You achieved your belt with sweat and attention, and all I knew was that when time came to go to class I couldn't wait and I didn't miss.

In retrospect, even then karate helped me stay balanced, and ever since then karate has been giving me something. I realize now that all the people who have ever attuned a move for me, taught me a kata, adjusted a stance or encouraged me to keep going have all given me something. Interestingly, these people never ask for anything in return.

Anxiety still rears its head from time to time and I carry it around with me. Sometimes it's a weight in my back pocket and for short periods it may become a laden backpack. Either way, when I enter the dojo I leave it at the door, and as I walk through this life I keep it behind me.

The Yin and Yang in a Kata are a perfect analogy for the soft and hard in life. In our endeavors in the dojo or on the street there are slow periods and then those with Godspeed; there are difficult points and points of fluid strength. Nevertheless, these are all a part of the Kata, a part of karate, and they mirror our lives. Karate, when approached and executed properly is a beautiful thing, and its returns are as deep and as layered as the ground we walk on. In my humble opinion, karate, like life, is about finding a balance and finding clarity through persisting. That's my karate, at least.

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Jeff, (left) receiving his Shodan certificate from sensei Bruce Lee 7th Dan.