



THE OBJECT OF KARATE

ABSTRACT

This dialogue is in response to the question “what do you feel should be the objects of karate training our modern society?”

Gavin Hazel

Karate-do, alongside its precursors such as *Te*, *Tode*, *Kenpo*, and the numerous lineages that link the Ryukyu Kingdom with mainland Asia, embodies an intricate and multifaceted art (Bishop, 2017; Draeger & Smith, 1981; Funakoshi, 1981; Giffen, 2008; Lowry, 2013; Swift, 2019). This martial tradition, steeped in centuries of cultural exchange and adaptation, is a rich tapestry woven from diverse influences and techniques (Giffen, 2008).

Am I trying to get it right or am I trying to find something

YoY o Ma

At its core, *Karate-do* is not merely a physical discipline; it is a dynamic response to external, and perhaps internal, threats and challenges¹. As McCarthy aptly describes, karate is grounded in its fundamentally need to respond to "Habitual Acts of Physical Violence" (McCarthy, 2015). This process or dialogue has been crafted through generations of practitioners who refined their skills to confront the ever-present realities of conflict, shaping an art that is both practical in its application but also profound in its philosophical depth.

A *martial art*, however, transcends the sum of its patterns and practiced responses. It is, at its essence, *a living system of thought and action* (a theme we will explore here). Whether we turn to Bruce Lee's explorations in *Jeet Kune Do*, examine historical combat texts like the *Bubishi*, or consider the guiding principles laid out by Funakoshi for *Karate-do*, a common pursuit emerges: the endeavour to navigate within the fluid and adaptive nature of combat, while also reaching beyond to establish a coherent framework of principles governing action, judgment, and intent. This pursuit reveals an understanding that martial arts are more than mere technique—they are systems of values and decisions that apply to both combat and life.

At the same time, there is a profound pedagogical dimension woven into these arts. They are founded on the belief that these skills, attitudes, and dispositions are, by their very nature, both teachable and learnable. Through disciplined training, martial artists pass down not only techniques but also a way of thinking, a mindset, that connects each generation of

Every truth has four corners. As a teacher I give you one corner; and it is for you to find the other three

Confucius

practitioners. This aspect underscores that martial arts are not only personal but inherently relational, designed to be shared, transmitted, and transformed through the guidance of a teacher and the dedication of a student (Arakaki, 2000; Funakoshi, 1994; Motobu, 2020; Smith, 2017; Waitzkin, 2007).

The dialogic and transformative essence of *Karate-do* calls for a delicate balance

between preserving tradition and embracing innovation. This art, like any classic work of enduring significance, holds a deep reservoir of meaning, technique, and philosophy, awaiting exploration. Its layered practices offer a foundation rooted in form and discipline, yet they also invite a continuous quest for new insights and approaches, encouraging practitioners to refine, adapt, and evolve.

We can see these themes richly explored in the movie *Kuro Obi*. Set in the context of 1932 Japan and follows three karate practitioners—Taikan, Giryu, and Choei—who train under the strict tutelage of their master, Eiken Shibahara, in a secluded dojo. When Shibahara Sensei dies, he leaves behind his black belt as a symbol of true martial prowess and character, instructing his

Studying karate nowadays is like walking in the dark without a lantern. We have to grope our way in the dark. There are so many things which do not make sense and there are a lot of things I cannot understand. Therefore, while our grandmasters are still alive, we have to see them and ask many questions. I think it is still very difficult to find the answers even if we did so

Miyagi Chojun

students that only the one who fully embodies the spirit of karate should inherit it. Each practitioner's journey diverges as they confront moral challenges that test their loyalty, honour, and understanding of karate's purpose. The film explores the ethical challenges of martial arts, emphasizing that karate is not just about fighting but about self-mastery and moral integrity.

Each generation of martial artists—and indeed each individual—approaches *Karate-do* with a unique perspective, seeking to capture something of the art's limitless possibilities. They mine its depths, not only to master the techniques handed down but to uncover personal growth, adaptability, and a fresh understanding of its principles. In this way, *Karate-do* remains a living tradition, balancing an honouring of its past while

inviting the creativity and interpretation of each new practitioner. It is through this ongoing cycle of learning and reinvention that *Karate-do* maintains its relevance and vitality across generations, fostering a dynamic interplay between continuity and change.

Karate Across Boundaries: Tradition and Transformation

Given this context, what, then, should be the aims of Karate in modern society? Are these fundamentally different from those of the past? While each era brings its own distinctive challenges and priorities, there are threads of shared experience that connect practitioners across time. At key moments, influential voices within the lineages and traditions of Karate—and martial arts more broadly—have spoken not only to the immediate concerns of their own context but have also reached forward to resonate with contemporary life.

This enduring relevance is evident in works like *The Book of Five Rings*, where Miyamoto Musashi presents a set of practices and guiding heuristics, shaped by his worldview and historical context. Yet, embedded within these specifics are principles—ones that transcend Musashi's world to offer insights into discipline, focus, and strategy that are as relevant now as they were at the time of writing.

Yet, the cultural and historical context of karate—its deeply embedded hierarchies, the nuances of Japanese cultural practices, and its often rigid adherence to tradition—cannot be ignored. As karate has transitioned from the East to the West, it has inevitably evolved, sometimes transforming in ways that distance it from its original roots (Giffen, 2008; Lowry, 2009, 2013, 2017; McCarthy, 2015; Nagamine, 2011; Smith, 2017). In this migration, we see karate taking on various forms, influenced by new cultures and practices, adapting and morphing as it finds its place in different societies (Draeger & Smith, 1981; Giffen, 2008; Lowry, 2017).

This journey has, at times, stripped certain elements of karate from their original meaning, with symbols and practices detached from the context that once gave them depth. The language and principles of karate risk becoming a kind of argot or creole—a blend of styles, techniques, and interpretations that, while vibrant, can lack the authenticity and cohesion of its origin. This

fusion, though it has allowed karate to spread and thrive globally, presents a complex challenge: how to preserve the art's essence while allowing it to adapt (Smith, 2017).

Thus, while the expressions and applications of Karate may evolve to suit modern circumstances, its core objectives—self-discipline, ethical conduct, and the harmonious alignment of body and mind—continue to form a bridge between past and present. The task, then, for today's practitioners is to engage with these perennial values while adapting their expression to meet the needs and aspirations of contemporary society, ensuring that Karate remains grounded in the now.

Find the way: Purpose and intent

What distinguishes karate as a discipline, setting it apart—or at least making it uniquely recognisable—among the many martial arts? What does it offer to the practitioner that is distinctive? Certainly, karate shares meaningful commonalities with other cultural practices, forms of combat, and even modern sports. Yet, is it simply the allure of the exotic or the appeal of something foreign, the “other,” that gives it meaning and purpose for practitioners today?

Finding meaning in karate is not bound to a single intent or purpose. Instead, the journey through karate can be shaped by a wide range of motivations that may evolve with time, context, and personal growth. Each practitioner brings their unique goals and experiences, redefining what they seek to gain from the art as they progress. Some may come to karate for the challenge of learning something new, eager to explore the intricate techniques and disciplined training. Others may be drawn to the physical and tactical engagement, finding fulfillment in the strength, agility, and endurance that karate training cultivates.

For some, the journey is deeply personal—a way to build confidence, enhance self-awareness, or feel safer in their daily lives. They might approach karate as a means of self-defence or as a way to overcome personal limitations, strengthening both their bodies and their minds. Meanwhile, others may be inspired by the aesthetic and philosophical aspects of karate, driven by a desire to understand its essence and unlock the deeper values that the art embodies. For these practitioners, karate becomes a path of introspection, a lifelong pursuit to uncover the principles of harmony, humility, and self-mastery.

Karate is a path of absolute self-perfection. To this end, it is essential for karate practitioners to conquer their own weak minds with an overcoming spirit, and to always be calm and composed. Even if a practitioner faces a hostile opponent, they must strive through practice to cultivate true grit and courage so they can disarm the opponent's will to fight. Thus, the way of karate is the way of man (human beings)—the karma of transferring the techniques of mastery to one's own body in accordance with the laws of heaven (nature), in order to attain the supreme state of oneness of spirit and body.

Sakamoto sensei

Consequently, in a practical sense the objectives of karate are flexible and deeply personal. It is an art that accommodates shifting motivations and goals. Whether the focus is physical prowess, mental resilience, philosophical inquiry, or simply the joy of movement, karate offers a space in which each individual can construct their karate journey.

The central insight here is that the perspective we bring to karate fundamentally shapes our understanding of both its nature and its purpose. Our framing of karate's

objectives is not merely about defining desired outcomes; it also influences how we perceive and describe karate as an art form and a discipline.

I would argue, therefore, that the objectives of karate are inseparable from the nature of karate itself. To practice karate with authenticity is to engage with it as a lifelong journey, aiming not only for technical skill but for personal transformation. These objectives—self-discipline, respect, and resilience—arise naturally from karate’s deeper structure and philosophy. They are not external goals imposed upon the art, but instead, they emerge organically from within its practice, revealing karate’s purpose as a pathway to self-mastery and harmony.

In short, karate’s objectives reflect its essence. By aligning our perspective with this holistic understanding, we come to see karate not only as a martial art but as a disciplined, meaningful way of being. Let’s explore how this perspective might unfold.

Karate: a system for change

When viewed through the lens of **systems thinking**, karate can be understood as a dynamic, interconnected system that involves various components working together to achieve holistic outcomes. Rather than isolating techniques or skills, systems thinking perspective emphasises the relationships between physical, mental, and philosophical elements and how these interact within the context of practice.

Key Components in seeing Karate as a System:

1. **Interconnected Elements:** In karate, the body, mind, and spirit are not separate entities but interconnected components of a single dynamic system. Physical movements are deeply tied to mental focus and emotional balance. For instance, a punch is not just an isolated action but is the result of the coordination between the stance, breath, gaze, and intention, showing how elements work together toward a unified purpose.
2. **Feedback Loops:** Feedback is essential in karate. Every technique practiced offers immediate feedback through physical sensations, instructor guidance, and personal observation. This feedback loop refines and adjusts actions, building a continuous process of improvement and self-correction. Kumite and Bunkai, for example, provides real-time feedback that challenges practitioners to adapt quickly and learn from successes and mistakes.
3. **Self-Organisation and Adaptation:** Karate, like other systems, is adaptive. Practitioners learn to adjust and refine techniques to meet various challenges, moving from rigid forms to a more fluid understanding of movement and strategy. Over time, as new situations arise, karateka develop resilience and responsiveness, allowing them to handle diverse encounters with flexibility and control. In turn the style also adapts and organises to reflect these new understandings.
4. **Emergent Properties:** In karate, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The culmination of training—technique mastery, self-confidence, mental clarity, and ethical discipline—produces emergent qualities that aren’t present in isolated components. These qualities arise from the interaction of techniques, philosophy, and practice, yielding personal growth and a deeper understanding of the self.
5. **Holistic Perspective:** Systems thinking in karate fosters a holistic approach, encouraging practitioners to see beyond individual techniques or objectives. The art

isn't simply about physical fitness or combat skills; it's about developing a balanced way of life. This holistic perspective promotes health, self-awareness, ethical conduct, and a deeper connection to the art's cultural roots. We can see this perspective in Funakoshi's twenty guiding principles where he attempts to articulate karate as way of being, perspective and action (Funakoshi et al., 2003)

6. **Purpose and Values as System Drivers:** A systems thinking perspective acknowledges that a system's purpose drives its behaviour. In karate, the purpose isn't solely self-defence but includes personal development, growth in judgement, and mastery of mind and body. These values shape the system, influencing the types of training, the mindset of practitioners, and the broader community they create.

Seen then as an adaptive system, Karate evolves in response to the needs and experiences of practitioners and context. From beginner to advanced levels, each practitioner is a part of this system, contributing to its growth and ongoing transformation. The adaptability within karate allows it to be flexible across cultures, time periods, and individual goals, sustaining its relevance by continuously evolving while staying rooted in core principles.

By viewing karate through systems thinking, it becomes clear that karate is not just a martial art but a complex, integrated practice that shapes and is shaped by those who engage with it. This perspective enriches the understanding of karate as a living, evolving system that nurtures both individual and collective growth, connecting body, mind, and spirit in an interdependent, holistic way.

Effortless Action: Wu Wei in a Karate System

From this point of view a key objective of Karate becomes its principle drive action orientation process, which iterative seeks to find a way. Through refinement and insight, the process offers different experiences and opportunities. The nature of these experiences can vary greatly depending on the practitioner's personal goals and level of commitment. However, a unifying aim across the spectrum of Karate practice is the pursuit of effortlessness, an approach characterized by non-forced action.

This principle aligns closely with the concept of *Wu Wei*, a Taoist idea that advocates for natural, unforced action, flowing in harmony with one's environment rather than resisting it. *Wu Wei* encapsulates a way of thinking and moving that transcends mere physical effort, inviting practitioners to cultivate fluidity, mindfulness, and a harmonious response to any situation.

Wu Wei aligns closely with the concept of *Flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998), where peak performance and enjoyment emerge from a deep immersion and an intrinsic connection to the process at hand. This sense of flow is marked by presence, effortless concentration, and a unity between the individual and their actions.

Wu Wei is the art of sailing, rather than the art of rowing. In other words, Wu Wei is the principle of not forcing in anything that you do. It is a practice where we apply our efforts in a way that is in harmony with the natural course, rather than struggling against it.

Alan Watts

Historical figures such as Miyamoto Musashi, Takuan Soho, and Yagyu Munenori explore, in their distinct ways, this principle through swordsmanship, viewing mastery as a mental state in which one acts instinctively, free from the constraints of overthinking. Similarly, Bruce Lee, influenced heavily by traditional Chinese martial arts philosophy, encouraged practitioners to "be like water," capturing, in my view, the essence of both *Wu Wei* and *flow*—a state where one can adapt to any circumstance effortlessly and naturally.

In *Breathe: A Life in Flow*, Rickson Gracie shares his experience applying the principles of immersion, presence, balance, and resilience to achieve his own form of flow within Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Gracie demonstrates how the cultivation of mind-body harmony is essential not only in physical performance but also in navigating life's challenges with clarity and calmness (Gracie, 2021).

Across these practices, we observe that achieving flow is not merely about technique but about the acquisition of embodied, experiential qualities that reveal the deeper purpose of martial arts. In my view, this experiential depth speaks directly to the essence of martial arts, and particularly to Karate, where one seeks to cultivate a state of harmony, resilience, and inner stillness. These elements lie at the heart of the "why" behind martial practice: to foster a way of being that extends beyond combat, into a way of being.

Karate: Entering the Flow

To uncover the true objectives of karate training in modern society, we must cultivate a relationship with the art that is both dynamic and deeply intentional. This requires a perspective that considers not only the practical elements of karate but also its broader philosophical and developmental dimensions. We must ask ourselves: What is the purpose and intent of this practice, both for the art itself and for the individual practitioner?

While the foundational function of self-defense and combat cannot be overlooked, these tactical applications represent only a fraction of karate's purpose. To fully grasp its value, we must shift our focus beyond the immediate and practical, exploring its operational and strategic dimensions. Karate, in this sense, is not merely a skill to be mastered but a way of being—a recursive process that continually shapes and refines the practitioner even as it is shaped and refined by them.

This insight points to a deeper truth: karate is both process and product, journey and destination. The objectives we set for ourselves in practice should reflect this duality. They must align with the Way (*Do*), prioritizing the journey itself—the cultivation of discipline, resilience, and mindfulness—over a fixation on fixed outcomes or endpoints. To focus exclusively on the destination is to miss the richness and transformative power of the path.

In modern society, where the immediate and tangible often overshadow the reflective and intentional, karate offers a counterbalance. It invites us to engage fully, to be present in every moment of practice, and to view the art not as an end but as a means of personal and communal growth. This "inner" objective of kata transcends the boundaries of any specific style or lineage, resonating with a deeper and timeless aspect of the human condition and experience. To reach for this objective is to enter the flow.

*Here in this place both past and future meet
And in the living present join their power,
And, as in every union that's replete,
There is a richness which transcends the hour,
And makes it memorable for years to come
– So time will add its own encomium...
Since each of us, they say, is a living river
This tribute to our lives and to our land
Will serve to unite the gifted and the giver
And reinforce what we all understand:
That arts and learning merit our devotion
Just as our rivers feed both land and ocean.*

Bruce Dawe

End Dialogue



[Scene: A tranquil dojo, softly lit by morning light. The scent of incense drifts in the air. Sensei and Student sit facing each other, surrounded by the calm energy of the space.]

Student: Sensei, I wish to understand the true objects of karate. We practice each day, perfecting our forms and strikes, but I wonder: what is it that we truly seek?

Sensei: (smiles) Tell me, what do you believe we seek, my young student?

Student: I suppose... we seek strength. To master ourselves and to overcome others.

Sensei: (nodding) Strength is indeed a part of it, but is strength the end, or merely a path? Consider a river that cuts through mountains; is its goal to be strong, or is it simply flowing?

Student: (pausing) The river flows because it is its nature.

Sensei: Precisely. Karate, too, flows. Many come to it seeking power, victory, or even control. But these are fleeting. What is the strength of a clenched fist if it is only met with resistance?

Student: Then, what is the object we pursue?

Sensei: (pointing to a leaf fluttering to the ground) That leaf, it falls, yet does not struggle. It is both guided by the wind and free from it. In karate, the object is not to dominate, but to be in harmony with oneself and the world around. This is what we call 'wu wei' – effortless action. To strike without force, to defend without thought, to be fully present in the moment.

Student: But Sensei, if there is no goal, why train? Why discipline the body and mind?

Sensei: Ah, training is necessary, but not for the reasons you think. We train not to conquer others but to understand ourselves. Through the form, we find formlessness. Through discipline, we discover freedom. A warrior who fights only with strength may break, but one who flows with the rhythm of life, like water, cannot be shattered.

Student: (thoughtfully) So the object of karate is... to become like water?

Sensei: (smiling) Yes, and no. Water is but one example. It takes the shape of whatever contains it, yet is never bound. Karate teaches us to be adaptable, to face life's challenges without rigidity. But even this understanding is just a stepping stone.

Student: Then, what lies beyond?

Sensei: Emptiness. Not emptiness as in void, but as in fullness – the realization that all things are connected, that every strike, every movement is a part of the whole. When you reach this understanding, you will see that karate is not about winning or losing, but about being. It is a mirror that reflects the true nature of your spirit.

Student: (slowly nodding) So, the object of karate is to find oneself?

Sensei: Yes, and to lose oneself as well. When you are no longer bound by desire, fear, or even thought itself, then you will truly understand the way. Until then, practice. Not for victory, not for strength, but for the simple joy of movement, for the connection to the world around you.

[A moment of silence passes, and the sound of a breeze rustles through the dojo.]

Student: Thank you, Sensei. I think... I am beginning to see.

Sensei: (softly) You have always seen, my student. Now, you are simply learning to trust what is already there.

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ⁱ Modern Karate encompasses a wide range of formats and variations. While much of this diversity can be attributed to specific schools and/or styles, a significant distinction also exists between Karate as a “sport” and its more “traditional” orientations. This discussion adopts a broad perspective that embraces these differences, though it prioritises a traditional focus. Even within this traditional lens, distinctions arise between “Japanese” and “Okinawan” Karate. Readers are encouraged to approach this with an inclusive mindset, recognising the variety within Karate, while noting that Okinawan Karate serves as the foundational context for this exploration. This approach has its limitations and may at times result in overgeneralizations or a bias toward a particular perspective. However, in broad terms, I believe it aligns with the way Karate is currently understood and practiced in its various forms. Be they sport or traditional.