

# Shotokan Karate - An Organic Approach Towards Holistic Youth Development

By Pratik Dalal

## Abstract

*“The ultimate aim of Karate lies not in victory nor in defeat, but in the perfection of the character of its participants”*  
- Gichin Funakoshi (Founder of Shotokan Karate)

Through this paper, I revisit some of the grave social issues our youth face today. I intend to argue that the conventional approaches to address these issues may not be optimal in today’s complex society and therefore a fundamental lifestyle improvement of the individual may be necessary. I briefly present an analysis on one traditional martial art<sup>1</sup> – ‘Shotokan Karate’ to highlight its benefits. My goal here is to show a correlation between these benefits of Shotokan Karate and the various life-skills & as to how it can be an extremely effective yet organic strategy for overall youth development. I also aim to spread the awareness of Shotokan Karate – a modern Japanese martial art, specifically amongst those readers who may be less or not familiar at all with this valuable ‘way-of-life’.

## Introduction and Brief History of Shotokan

Karate, or better called as ‘Karate-Do’ (in Japanese) translates to ‘the way of empty hand’. While there are different styles of traditional Karate, ‘Shotokan’ is a very popular style developed from various martial arts by its founder and the father of modern day Karate, Sensei<sup>2</sup> Gichin Funakoshi. For Sensei Funakoshi, the word ‘Karate’ eventually took on a deeper meaning than just martial arts training. He was to modify the Okinawan art by taking inspiration from traditional Japanese budo (kendo, judo, etc) and integrated their philosophical aspects into his training and teaching methods. This became a total discipline, which represented a synergy of Okinawan and Japanese schools and in 1936 he established the ‘SHOTOKAN’ style of Japanese Karate which was to be greatly influenced by his son Yoshitaka (Gigo) and Masatoshi Nakayama, first headmaster of the Japan Karate Association.

There are no weapons used in Shotokan Karate and literally speaking, it is indeed the way of empty hand. Said differently from purely a self-defense perspective, the Karateka<sup>3</sup> undergoes rigorous physical and mental training to develop his/her own body and mind into a weapon, thereby increasing one’s chances to better defend against the unforeseen ‘threat’. However, Karate-do is not just about punching and kicking. The Budo<sup>4</sup> aspect, i.e. the martial arts way of Karate aims towards perfection of one’s character, and this aspect of Shotokan Karate is what I intend to focus on in this paper.

Some important questions I have pondered over for years during my training of Shotokan Karate: ‘Can a traditional martial art like Shotokan Karate be a potential solution to address some of the grave issues experienced by our youth today? Can it treat such issues at the grass-root level organically? If so, how?’

## **Current Social Scenario with Youth – The Problem**

Before I present my views to answer these questions, let's first highlight some of the prevalent problems today. According to one research, the top 10 issues teens struggle with today:

1. Depression
2. Bullying
3. Sexual activity
4. Drugs
5. Alcohol
6. Obesity
7. Academic problems
8. Peer pressure
9. Social Media
10. On-Screen Violence

Each one of these issues have been thoroughly researched by various experts but collectively, these problems thematically indicate some kind of 'social void' in our teenage community. Why is our youth most exposed today than ever before to drug-abuse, alcohol-abuse, gun-violence, suicides & bullying? While several preventative measures have already been there in place for years, clearly, much more remains to be done. The society therefore demands alternative and innovative approaches that can nurture the next-generation youth at a fundamental level. So why not focus on 'organic' solutions which can prevent these negative elements in our society naturally? I propose the way of Karate-do as one such organic approach.

### **What does organic approach mean?**

The following quote is often used when explaining the organic (or holistic) approach to problem solving:

"All the greatest and most important problems in life are fundamentally insoluble...They can never be solved, but only outgrown. This "outgrowing" proves on further investigation to require a new level of consciousness. Some higher or wider interest appeared on the horizon and through this broadening of outlook, the insoluble lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms but faded when confronted with a new and stronger life urge." From Jung, Carl, Psychological Types (Pantheon Books, 1923)

To put this into perspective, organic approach, is an alternative strategy to rational problem solving. Some people assert that the dynamics of people are not nearly so mechanistic as to be improved by solving one problem after another. Often, the quality of life comes from how one handles being "on the road" itself, rather than the "arriving at the destination." The quality comes from the ongoing process of trying, rather than from having fixed a lot of problems.

## **Proposed Solution – the way of traditional Shotokan Karate**

There has been a significant amount of research done by various experts on the philosophical aspects of martial arts. In my view, if we consider traditional Karate as a tool, then consider its specifications below:

### **Karate-Do Specifications**

- Self-Defense / Combat training
- Physical well-being / Intense workout
- Mental & Spiritual well-being
- Respect & humility towards others
- Develop good spirit
- Confidence building
- Team building / Camaraderie
- Mitigate violent behavior
- Discipline & Character-building

As highlighted by the various specifications of Karate-do, a well conducted class in Shotokan Karate should leave a student ‘fulfilled’. Irrespective of how your day may have been negatively impacted at school, work or social/personal level, that 1-to-2-hour training session should leave you satisfied and with a positive feeling, or in other words, it should re-energize you. To better demonstrate, let us take a deeper look into one, yet a very important problem with our teens – Depression.

Depression has become increasingly common among American teenagers – especially teen girls, who are now almost three times as likely as teen boys to have had recent experiences with depression. In 2017, 13% of U.S. teens ages 12 to 17 (or 3.2 million) said they had experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past year, up from 8% (or 2 million) in 2007, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of data from the [2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#). Some researchers blame technology for the rise in mental health problems in adolescents. For instance, spending too much time on electronic devices may be preventing young people from engaging in sports or peer activities that help ward off depression. They also experience new conditions like "fear of missing out" or FOMO<sup>5</sup>, which further leads to feelings of loneliness and isolation. So, if kids and teenagers were to be engaged in a peer activity such as a Karate class, it implies that they are away from technology, social media or any kind of screen time for at least 2 hours. Isn't that in itself a small step towards preventing 'depression'? The National Institute of Mental Health (NIH) recommends 'staying active, exercising and keeping regular sleep schedule' as some of wellness-based treatments to manage depression. These are very well covered as part of Karate practice.

At a Karate Dojo<sup>6</sup>, all Karateka collectively train under a single roof irrespective of their age, race, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability or cultural beliefs. There is absolutely no room for prejudice or harassment, or for that matter any such negative behavioral elements that are often the root causes of the various teen problems outlined above.

By way of rigorous and disciplined training of both categories of traditional Karate ("kata" - the forms, and "kumite" - sparring), a Karateka develops self-confidence and continually fosters one's self-esteem. Yes 'self-confidence' and 'self-esteem' -> Two very important life-skills that are extremely critical for youth development. It should be no surprise to learn that the lack of these very basic personality traits, in most cases, lay the foundation for anxiety, depression, isolation and in some cases, even suicides.

Another problem today with vast majority of youngsters, is to expect everything to be immediate. Eventually, this results into a high rate of dissatisfaction coupled with quality degradation in whatever tasks/endeavors they end up taking. They are generally in a rush to get things done quickly for themselves as well as expect the same from others. At times, their circumstances put them in a scenario where they are forced to cut corners. Karate is not immediate and requires study and persistent training, and therefore counteracts this issue. Shotokan Karate teaches us that lethal force (i.e. the 'shortcut') may not always be necessary but rather psychological tools are more appropriate to deal with the imminent threat. Karate requires judgment, reaction and moderation according to circumstances.

Being associated with a Karate Dojo allows one to be part of not just the specific Dojo, but also gives an individual a unique opportunity to be part of the global Karate family. Yes indeed - the "Family", an institution where most of the life-skills are supposed to be developed in children and yet most of the youth in today's fast-paced world are deprived off, knowingly or unknowingly. There is a famous Sanskrit phrase "vasudhaiva kutumbakam" which means 'the world is one family'. The Karate-do community, by way of its principles and traditions is one such worldly family where you learn not only to kick and punch but also important life skills & character refinement to promote overall growth & development. To validate this notion of 'Karate as a family', a recent poll was conducted at the JKA WF Chicago Karate Institute<sup>2</sup> among the junior Karate members. They were asked to provide their own, genuine responses to an important question: 'What similarity do you find between your own family and Karate?'. Here are some of the responses:

*"I think Karate and family are similar because Dojo members are like family. We take care of each other if something is going on whether in the Dojo or outside. We help one another and try to find a solution similar to what a family does"* [Yousif, 17-year-old, black belt]

*"I find that a lot of my family morals are present in Karate too"* [Matthew, 14-year-old, brown belt]

*"I find similar bonding"* [Natsumi, 13-year-old, brown belt]

*"For me, its Manners"* [Prerna, 11-year-old, brown belt]

*"In my family, I am told not to make same mistakes. In Karate also, I learn to make new mistakes"* [Veer, 9-year-old, brown belt]

*"Discipline"* [Pavlo, 7-year-old, purple belt]

Today's kids/teenagers automatically feel more secure if they get to be part of such a larger family. You simply have more family members to take care of you. You are surrounded by Karateka who believe in growing together and so no individual is left out. There is an air of excitement & optimism during each Karate class and you truly realize that failures can no longer summarize your life. As my coach & a world-class Karate master, sensei Neeraj Dhawan<sup>8</sup> often says - "FAIL" is essentially 'First Attempt In Learning!'. Karate preaches self-motivation and to keep fighting your opponents (aka the obstacles in life). You fall, but then you get up and keep going! With this attitude, I firmly believe that we are giving the required tool our youth deserves in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Similarly, a poll was conducted for the parents. They were asked to share their perspective on – ‘What changes have they seen in their children, after having started to study Karate-do?’. Here are quotes from some of the responses:

*“I definitely see improved body coordination in Natsumi. Also, her overall discipline has improved primarily due to the high quality of instruction she is receiving here”* [Mrs. Yuko Sharpee]

*“Matthew’s focus has improved which is tremendously helping him in his academics”* [Mr. Mitch Dubinsky – School Principal]

*“I think the main thing that helps with Karate training, is the practice of focusing. They practice focusing on their movements and that helps them with homework and other areas. I would say it’s true of any discipline as long as they stick to it.”* [Dr. Ankur Dhawan]

*“It helps to counter passivity in children and builds self-confidence. They also learn to atleast speak up whenever they get bullied.”* [Mr. Danny Salas]

Focus, balance, agility, body strength and power, flexibility, body coordination -> all these help the Karateka to develop a healthy body by way of disciplined physical training. Physical work-out though is not enough. Having a relaxed mind is equally important. It is well-known that simple breathing exercise for just 10 minutes on a daily basis helps to reduce stress, but realistically speaking, today’s common man is so much engrossed with his daily hectic schedule, that most of the times, he finds it challenging to spare even 10 min per day for his own health benefit. Learning to relax & focus on one’s breathing while training is one important recipe of a traditional Karate class. As part of this regime, the Karateka learns to communicate effectively with his/her own body & mind. Through such regular practice, our body develops endurance which, in the long run, also serves as a preventative measure towards several health ailments.

There is a very famous inscription in Japanese on Master Funakoshi’s tomb: “Karate-do ni sente nashi”, which translates to "There is no first attack in Karate-do". A Karate class starts and ends with a bow. This teaches one humility. “Dojo kun”, aka the ‘rules’ are recited in every Karate class. These five rules that set expectations for one’s behavior are:

1. Seek perfection of character
2. Be faithful
3. Endeavor (or Endeavor to Excel)
4. Respect others
5. Refrain from violent behavior

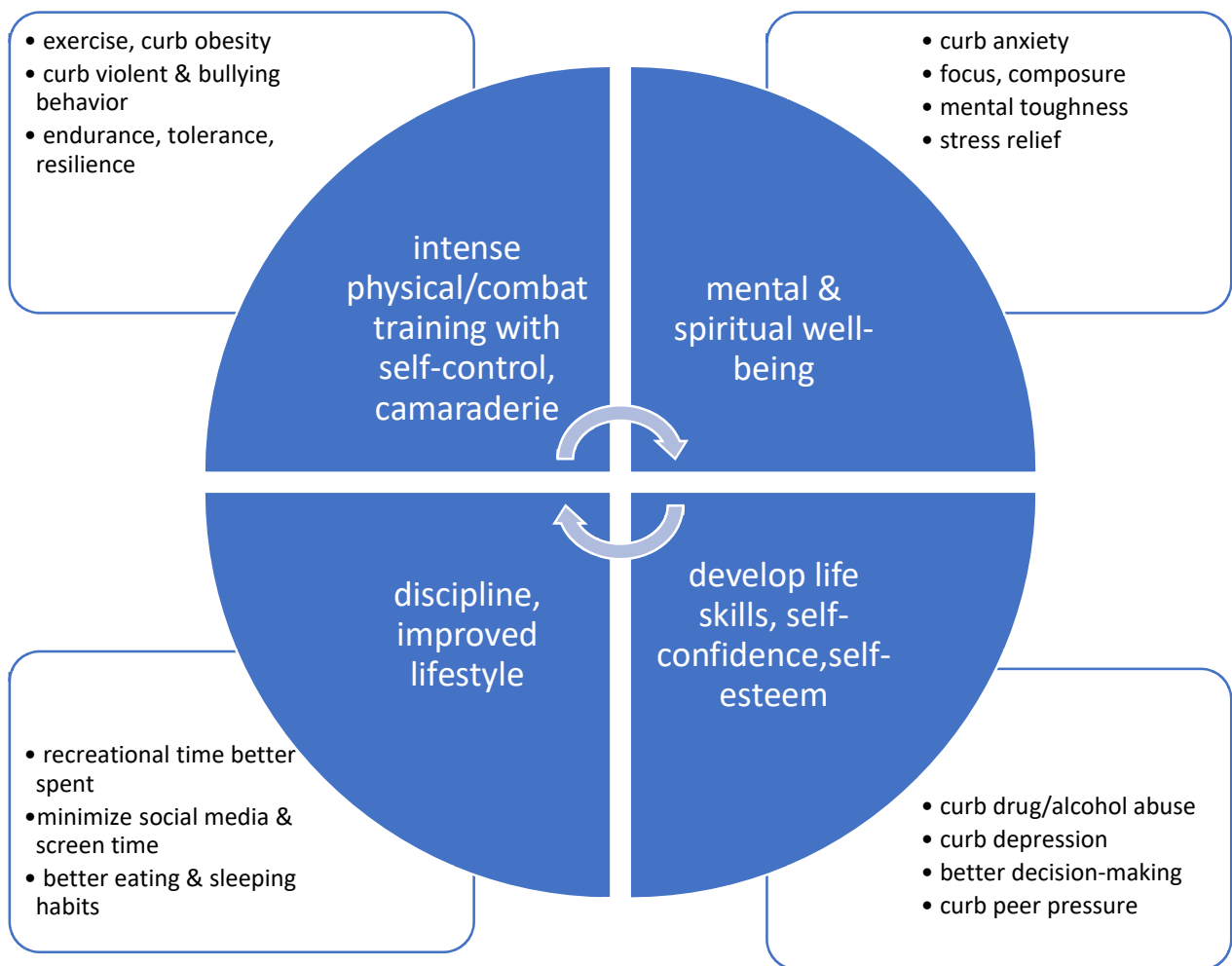
Five very simple rules of ‘Budo<sup>9</sup> Karate’ (traditional Karate as a martial art) but in today’s world that most of the youth may feel as complex, we tend to struggle incorporating one or more of these simple rules in our day to day lives! Each Karate class reminds its students about these valuable life principles, serving as a quality assurance of one’s character.

A student of Karate also learns to compete. Competition Karate has its own merits, especially when it comes to youth development. When you compete, you learn to face ‘the unknown’ and persistently

doing so builds self-confidence. Young Karateka<sup>10</sup> eventually grow to face new obstacles in life fearlessly since the 'fear of unknown' gradually diminishes with more training and competing against different opponents (aka the obstacles). In tense situations (e.g. competitions), Karate training helps you to calm down and stay composed. This is an important benefit of Karate as it teaches to cope with anxiety.

Given its inherent values, the art of Karate-do preaches its students to be high on ethical & moral grounds. As Karate teenagers mature into becoming adults, they strive towards excellence instead of running after success. That adult is eventually groomed to become a better citizen, who in turn is responsible to share the principles of Karate-do with others.

Here's a summary on how this organic approach by way of Shotokan Karate can be helpful, particularly for teenagers:



## **Conclusion**

Shotokan Karate was developed originally with one of its primary goals to perfect one's character. I have tried to demonstrate in this paper as to how Shotokan Karate, with its specifications, can be an effective practical tool for our youth to tackle the various challenges they face today by way of fundamental lifestyle improvement. In that regards, traditional Karate such as Shotokan gives opportunity to any individual to lead an overall healthy life. It is an exciting, yet simple & natural way of life. Karate is a journey that can be pursued throughout one's lifetime.

## **The Author**

**Pratik Dalal** has been actively training Traditional Shotokan Karate for over 14 years. He currently holds 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree Black-Belt (3<sup>rd</sup> Dan) from JKA (Japan Karate Association) and is an athlete as well as an officiating member of USANKF<sup>11</sup>. Pratik has been competing in various Karate tournaments at regional and national levels. Additionally, Pratik is a certified JKA instructor as well as USA Karate licensed Kata & Kumite Judge. Pratik is currently affiliated & actively practicing Karate at the JKA WF Chicago Karate Institute<sup>12</sup>. The author is grateful to the various members of Chicago Karate Institute ([www.chicagokarate.info](http://www.chicagokarate.info)) for facilitating the valuable datapoints presented in this paper.

## Appendix

1. Martial Art: The art or training systems of combat
2. Sensei: A teacher or instructor, usually of a Japanese martial art
3. Karateka: the student/practitioner of Karate
4. Budo: a philosophy and a way of life that utilizes Martial Arts (Bujutsu) as a means of self-improvement.
5. FOMO: Fear Of Missing Out
6. Dojo: the school or place where the Karate training is conducted
7. Neeraj Dhawan: <https://chicago-karate.wixsite.com/jka-wf-chicago/sensi>
8. JKA WF Chicago Karate Institute: [www.chicagokarate.info](http://www.chicagokarate.info)
9. USANKF: USA National Karate-do Federation (<https://www.teamusa.org/USA-Karate.aspx>)

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