



By: Emily Chua

Dalhousie Chancellor's Scholarship

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One September afternoon I was walking by a bulletin board when a notice caught my eye. It depicted a man executing an impossibly high side kick, with a fringe of tags containing contact information for "Sensei Tony Tam" along the bottom. On a whim I pulled one off and not long after, found myself crossing the threshold of the Dalhousie Karate Club dojo, entering not only an unfamiliar setting, but a whole new world.

The five years since that day have found me a much changed person. Throughout my teenage years, I have watched as my belt darkened from white, through the spectrum of the rainbow, and finally to black. It has been a challenging journey for both body and spirit, which has made each step forward all the more gratifying. The physical progress is visual and easily measurable. What is not as palpable – but just as crucial – is the mental change. I am much more confident in my own abilities than I used to be; I have also found an inner calm that has helped to guide me through the pressures of high school and a trying stage of life.

Many view teenagers as apathetic, rebellious and indifferent to tradition. I participate regularly in an activity which proves otherwise. From the constant bows of respect, to the meditation, to the recitation of the dojo values, the consistency and unbreakable tradition of Shotokan karate is a spiritual balm. Its essence is that in order to excel, one must render the mind completely empty and be as serene and open as the wind rippling through mountaintop trees – the "pine waves" which symbolize Shotokan. I do not belong to any religion, but if one defines the wholehearted belief in a set of values as spiritualism, then this philosophy is surely one. Shotokan's precepts are universal in that they relate to any reputable faith system; one must "seek perfection of character", "endeavour", and "respect others". All of these are also applicable in the wider world; if everyone could learn to adhere by this code, society would undoubtedly change for the better.

Recently, someone posed the question to my sensei as to what is the difference between a seventh-degree and a first degree black belt. He replied that there is no difference – the seventh degree has only attained such a high standing through spending more time in its pursuit. This is an inspiring lesson to all; as karate demonstrates, anything is attainable through hard work, determination, and unyielding dedication.

A valuable lesson I have learned is that one can embark on a journey without any fixed destination in sight; one can follow the twists and turns of the path and end up in an unexpected place. There is no pressure to complete a belt level, no race to the finish – because there is no end. One can always gain a higher belt level, or an instructor level, or status as a champion. Such is the nature of karate – it is an ever-evolving process in which a true practitioner is one who constantly seeks to improve one's own skills, as well as those of fellow students.

Our dojo is graced a few times a year by elderly Japanese sensei – the masters of the masters. Although ageing is inevitable, the fact that they are still actively practicing karate is a source of motivation. As well, visitors from different countries come to train while they stay in this part of the world. The Shotokan karate network is vast, which lends camaraderie to practitioners, even if they are meeting for the first time. This exemplifies the spirit of humankind; throughout the world, like-minded people are training in the pursuit of the same goal.

I enjoy the fact that all *karatekas* wear identical white uniforms; the only difference is the colour of the belt, and this only displays the length of training. I love this atmosphere in which, as we line up to bow to our sensei, I can literally rub shoulders with a neurosurgeon, a local news anchor, a national sparring champion – and a pint-sized nine-year-old. We all enter the dojo as equals. I can command respect from an adult with a lifetime of experience and accomplishment simply because I am demonstrating a technique that I have perfected. This is how true learning should be – without the barrier of appearance and preconception to hinder the experience. This, and karate's other lessons, is a message that society outside the dojo could heed.

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