

What is karate?

Simply put, karate is a system of unarmed self-defense involving a variety of stances, blocks, punches, strikes, kicks, and body shifts to affect a desired result in a specific situation. The word itself means "empty hand." And while it is true that the most well know styles of this form of martial art originate in Asia, it is also true that every people in the history of the planet have created their own system of self-defense depending on their particular needs and the cultures out of which they have come.

Shotokan Karate-Do, meaning the way of karate, was established by Funakoshi Gichin, a former Okinawan schoolteacher, in the early years of the twentieth century. Its guiding principles are codified in the *Dojo Kun* and the *Niju Kun* found on the "Additional information page" of this website. These principles spell out the manner in which a *karateka* should conduct him/herself in the execution of the art. The *Niju Kun* also reminds us that practice, not just training, is another important aspect of *Karate-Do*; that we must not ever forget the importance of knowing oneself as a prelude to learning about others; and that victory is less important than understanding that how efficaciously you acquit yourself in the struggle is what matters at the end of the day. Did you do your best? Perhaps, however, the most important of the ideas contained in the *Niju Kun* is the reminder that spiritual development transcends technique. It is, in my view, not so much a matter of knowing what to do in a specific situation, just because you know how to do it, as it is whether to do what you know how to do that speaks most loudly about the kind of person you are. In short, using the techniques of karate that one has learned from assiduous training and practice is best considered as a last course of action to be employed when all other courses of action have proved ineffective.

The content of *Karate-Do* as taught at Harambee Karate Club is comprised of three classes of endeavor. While they are approached serially they should be understood and learned as an inter-related whole steered by the will of the practitioner. They are: *Kihon* (Basics); *Kata* (Forms); and *Kumite* (Sparring). *Kihon* is another word for fundamentals. Included here are the stances, blocks, punches, kicks, strikes, and shifts of the body that are done repetitively until the *karateka* is comfortable with making, using, and correcting them to realize *Kime*—focused application at a given moment at a particular spot with adequate and appropriate power for maximum effect. *Kata* are choreographed forms comprised of combinations of various techniques that basically illustrate the application of directed force. Fundamentally, they are the textbooks of karate teaching us how to move in both space and time as we visualize one or more opponents and how we might respond in a specific situation through the use (*Bunkai*) of certain technique-to-technique connections. Finally, there is *Kumite*, sparring, both controlled and free wherein we learn to defend ourselves in a conflictual situation. Clearly one of the goals sought here is balance—both in karate and more generally in life itself. In seeking balance we are reminding ourselves of the dangers of embracing extremes that make it difficult for us to respond rather than react as the circumstances of the situations in which we find ourselves change from moment-to-moment mandating that we be dynamic in return.

How long will it take me to earn a black belt?

This is perhaps the most frequently asked question about karate. Unfortunately, there is no “one

size fits all” answer to this question. I say this because it depends on how much effort and how much time you are willing to put into your own training and practice to become comfortable in your use of the techniques of this particular martial art. Too, progress in karate is influenced by age, physical condition, attitude and whatever athletic ability you possess. Assuming that you pass every grading examination you take and wait the minimum amount of time between gradings, you can earn a first degree (*Shodan*) black belt in *Shotokan Karate-Do* in as little as three years. The average amount of time for most people, however, is somewhere between four and five years.

What is a grading examination and how often are they given?

Shotokan Karate-Do, like many other martial arts systems, utilizes a *kyu* and *dan* rating system. When you first enter training as a beginner you start as a white belt with a rank of ninth (9th) *kyu*. Three months later, if you have been diligent in your training and practice, you are eligible to test for yellow belt or (8th) *kyu*. This test will be comprised of *kata* (forms), *kihon* (basics), and *kumite* (controlled sparring). If you pass this test then you will learn additional materials in preparation for your next test three months hence until you have advanced to (1st) *kyu* meaning that you have received your third brown belt. After the passage of the requisite amount of time and with consistent practice your instructor will tell you whether you are ready to test for black belt, something that occurs at specified times of the year and in specified places. This examination is much more rigorous than your colored belt or brown belt examinations because once secured it signals that you are now a serious student of karate ready to learn more advanced skills and the responsibilities that come with their acquisition. While it is true that you are not required to test, testing, another aspect of training, can sometimes be useful as it offers you an opportunity to assess your progress, and what you yet need to do to improve your performance.

I have visited several dojos and in the course of my observations I have noticed that some students are doing different things than other students. What I want to know as a beginner is who will teach me the things I need to know and how I will be taught these things if the chief instructor does not begin at the beginning every time a new student enters the dojo?

This question addresses the uncertainty that many people feel when they begin training in the martial arts. How it is answered depends on the teaching style and educational philosophy of the instructor. Some instructors may invite the new students to just jump in and do what they see other people doing. Other instructors might assign one of the more senior people to shadow the beginner helping her/him to learn how the techniques are made and used along with gentle correction to fix the performance thereof or, as time permits, answer questions that arise in the course of a particular class session. The important thing to remember here is that whenever you have questions make sure you raise them. If you don't ask them they might not get answered. Asking questions is one sure way of learning what you do not know. And in karate it is wise to remember that sometimes the best way to learn is not to panic when you make a mistake. Rather, look at your mistakes as an opportunity to learn something you did not know—an opportunity to improve the performance of your skills, and the reality that perfection is a state of being that occurs only momentarily before it, too, passes on to be replaced by something else.

I have seen a number of demonstrations by karate folk at community celebrations. Sometimes these demonstrations have included breaking all manner of objects and fights between practitioners. Is this something that I will be expected to learn?

No, not really. The emphasis in *Shotokan Karate-Do* is on character development and, quite frankly, on training so that you will not have to fight unless it is clearly your last resort. Karate is a defensive art. Part of a successful defense is the realization that you can walk away from a tense situation without any loss of face as the first level of endeavor. Yes, you will learn how to fight. But the full-contact sparring that you see in the movies and elsewhere is not our objective. Simply put what we aim for is to ensure correct course of the technique so that if it becomes necessary to use what you have learned you have confidence in your ability to do what needs doing efficaciously with the minimum amount of effort required to complete the task successfully. We refer to this objective as making *kime* (focus) such that you bring the maximum amount of force to the chosen target at the correct moment.