

# Why karate apart from the past has also future – pro-health function of martial arts in a broader context

**Adrian Piórko-Pawliński**

Research Board, Polish Idokan Association, Rzeszów, Poland

**Key words:** martial arts, karate, culture, pro-health activities, education, socializing, mastering, master ethos

## Summary

The basic motivating factor of Polish karate in its pro-health effect – both for parents and children/youth.

Like other martial arts, karate offers the trainees more than traditional sports do: the awareness of being part of a team, cultural background, symbols and philosophic fundamentals. At each stage of karate training, the trainee's evolution and future achievements are clearly visible.

In Poland, modern karate is not only a sport but also a lifestyle (and another source of income for trainers). It has evolved – also in mass culture – to become the sport practiced on a mass scale.

## Scene 1 – world is changing, sport is changing...

**A fictional town Hill Valley. A typical saloon in the Wild West of the 19th century. A traveler from the future – end of the 20th century explains the men at the bar that in his times people run for pleasure. The stranger's words evoke bursts of laughter: "How come run for pleasure?"**

For the people living a hundred years ago, exercise, now identified with recreational activities, sports, or body development seems a pure abstraction. Running (now referred to as jogging) resulted only from the necessity, often due to unpleasant circumstances and was associated with pain, sometimes with humiliation. In the 21st century with highly developed sports activities, we do not always realize that even the Olympics (and the history of Olympic Games) started only a hundred years ago. Earlier, people did not need sport, although some substitute activities were performed that might be compared to the sports of nowadays. There were knights tournaments, being both court entertainment and martial training. There were "wrestling" competitions on fairs. In the 16th century European rulers, residences, the popular jeu de paume was the "great grandmother" of today's tennis.

However, it was only in the 20th century when participation in sport activities began on a large scale; people started doing, watching and dealing with sports for some significant, from the social point of view, reasons. A marked change in the

lifestyle is also of note; modern men have ceased to use muscular power in their basic life activities. It is now becoming more and more apparent that the unused muscles become flaccid and that this entire process may adversely affect our health.

The life of pre-industrial community is dominated by biological energy sources, strength of human and animal muscles, and for years, work has been performed according to the unchanging rules and using the same techniques. The characteristics for post-industrial communities include technical and humanitarian service – trade, finance, transport, health protection, recreation, research, education and management<sup>2</sup>.

The author's recent own research results indicate that the pro-health function of sports is the factor mostly affecting the interest in participation in various sports activities among schoolchildren and youth. The film scene quoted at the beginning of this paper seems to illustrate well the above mentioned phenomenon as pro-health activities belong to the sphere of social influence. As Małgorzata Górnik-Durose writes: Health promotion itself assumes social influence. It involves affecting the behavior of people or groups of people by other people or groups of people so as to cause changes in their behaviors according to their intention<sup>2</sup>. To make it clear, we should separate the motivation of school children or youth from that of adult individuals, firstly because these may differ, and secondly because peer pressure is usually stronger than parents' encouragement (or discouragement) of the child to undertake training. The statement that martial arts have sig-

nificant pro-health contribution is a truism. Another truism is that the present generation, especially young individuals, during the period of adolescence need exercise, activity and movement. The passive lifestyle model and the systems of physical education at Polish schools are widely criticised<sup>2</sup>. Therefore it is not surprising that parents encourage their children to participate in different forms of sports activities in order to compensate the shortcomings of the above mentioned social systems.

Looking at the phenomenon of participation in martial arts (as well as passive interest in this form of activity) from the social point of view, will allow us to develop a list of motivating factors, resulting in the growing number of recipients at all stages of possible engagement in this activity. Apart from the pro-health effect, there are also some social trends, strictly connected with the entire spectrum of mass culture issues: from the phenomena widespread by the mass media to global application of marketing techniques. This happens since we observe a very strict relation among the success of athletes with the development of interest in a given sport – also translated into the number of individuals interested in specific sports disciplines. We may see the examples of such behaviors among the fans of Adam Małysz, whose success contributed to a widespread interest in ski-jumping. The social aspects of this phenomenon has been accurately described by Jan Ryn: Małysz-mania approached its climax when the Pole's greetings began with "how he jumped" (...). After subsequent competitions the number of Polish fans increased. More Poles were present in Bergisel, and in Bischofshofen it was as if the emperor Franz Joseph were still on the throne and Małopolska and Krakow were still looking at Vienna<sup>2</sup>.

A less widespread interest, although of similar origin, may be observed for almost every sport success. The success of Robert Kubica, national volleyball team or Polish handball team are some of the examples.

Tradition is the next social factor, motivating people to regular participation in sports activities. Its role in the widespread interest in soccer among our community is unquestionable. In the same natural way, young Italians or Spanish (not to mention Latin American community) will tend to be fans of this sport while the Americans will be rather interested in football. This is due to the fact that tradition is based not only on the social effect of the behaviors that may be observed in the closest vicinity – participation in sports is supported by different organizational structures (e.g. a network of sports clubs), state support or the interest of mass media. The sports with rich tradition additionally offer a wide spectrum of personality patterns to follow: the well known and respected celebrities, who are idols for their fans, also beyond the sphere of their sports activity. In Poland, such examples to follow are Kazimierz Górski, Zbigniew Boniek or Włodzimierz Lubański.

Perhaps we do not always realize that the broadly understood discipline of martial arts has now become a deep-rooted tradition. Karate – despite the history of different organizational fractions – has been practiced in Poland (in an organized form) for over 30 years.

Some sources mention even earlier dates, it seems however, that for multiple reasons (also due to a very negative attitude of the communist regime towards karate – one of precursors was even accused of collaboration with Japanese intelligence service) we should ignore individual initiatives and accept the first organized forms of karate training as a beginning of the karate era in Poland. Interestingly, if we look back at the list of people engaged in the development of Polish karate, we would be surprised to find out there was a relatively large number of physicians among them – the professionals dealing with human body condition and treatment<sup>3</sup>. It is thus possible that pro-health attitudes were present in Polish karate from the very beginning of its development.

The above mentioned Polish Karate Association, based on the 30-years' tradition is the organization uniting over 40000 trainees from 170 sports clubs and 300 sections.

However, these statistical data are insufficient to present the phenomenon of karate, as Polish Karate Association is not the only organization dealing with this form of martial arts. For example, Oyama Karate associates 6000 trainees in 50 centers.

Thirty years. Is it a long or a short period of time? It is difficult to say. The popularity of martial arts is definitely incomparable with that of traditional sports, also in the aspect related to mass media. As the successes of Adam Małysz are presented to a very wide circle of recipients, the success of the karate fighter who won the European championships fourth time in a row are reported on the marginal position in the press. This does not change the fact however, that in our country young people have hundreds of sports clubs to their disposal where they can train martial arts; besides, the trainers – also due to a long lasting tradition – are quite well prepared for this.

The fourth motivating factor – especially referring to youth (although to some extent to their parents) is participation in martial arts in peer teams. Such participation does not only meet young people's physiological demands, but also favorably affects their physical development and makes them socialize. It allows them to gain experience in getting in contact with other people and helps to learn cooperation, observance of the commonly accepted rules and solidarity. Child's natural need to get acquainted with the world, new people, learning and skill mastering can be excellently developed by martial art training, as it can be observed in other sports.

The issue of motivation to martial arts training definitely deserves further thorough research. Motivation, both of the trainees and their parents or caregivers is also important. Empirical attitude towards this issue may help us to answer the questions emerging from different branches of knowledge: psychology, medicine or sociology, and develop practical fundamentals for health promotion, physical activity and overall development of young people. The list of civilization-related threats, e.g. disease units, is very long. They include stress, the risk of circulatory system diseases, cancer and alcohol or drug addiction. Maybe modern life is not so different from that of the Wild West pioneers – in some circumstances it also requires running.

## Scene two – a mysterious avenger arrives...

**The ruins of Roman Coliseum. Two opponents walk on the ground stained with gladiators' blood thousands of years ago. There are about to start the life-and-death struggle. One of them represents western culture while the other is veiled by the shadow of secret. He has eastern features, moves almost in a magic manner, is deadly serious and his cry does not resemble anything familiar to us.**

If we accept that the pro-health issues are the basic, although not the only reason for training martial arts, it is impossible to overlook the very essential difference between today's attitudes towards martial arts and their origins. Even if we expand the issues of martial arts to everything the humankind has created within this branch of knowledge, we may easily learn that this discipline has originated from the practical (sometimes forced) necessity to fight, not from the desire to promote pro-health behavior. Regardless the purpose of fight – national liberation or self-defense of the wandering monks – the impulse was provided by practice. However, it may be dangerous to draw wide-ranging conclusions. The world of Eastern martial arts is full of not always true stereotypes, forms, schools and authorities. Based on the Far East philosophy, multiple alternative systems were built, for different reasons. Other martial arts (such as Krav Maga, Sambo or Capoeira), originating from quite different cultural roots, on one hand have their own theses developed and on the other – they are frequently based (more or less consciously) on Eastern achievements.

It is obvious that karate is one of the Japanese major attractions. Together with judo and aikido it is mentioned as part of Japanese culture. Only elite literature describes the genesis of karate connected with the wandering Buddhist monks. This does not change the fact that the primary forms of karate began on Okinawa in the 17th century, the times when this peninsula was reigned by the Japanese, and the "tote" or "tode" skills were used against them.

The stereotypes cause confusion. For average audience, Bruce Lee is a karateka, like every Chinese, Korean and Japanese fighting on silver screen, no matter whether he represents kung – fu, judo or any other martial art. There was a song "King Bruce Lee – karate master" although now, almost everybody knows that Bruce Lee represented kung – fu. Even if we ignore the stereotypes concentrating on a reliable analysis, the sole historical evolution of karate is sufficient to make a lot of fuss. As Wojciech Cynarski writes: martial arts evolve in different directions (this refers both to the Far East and to Europe); the old tradition is nurtured and quite often the art is transformed into a combat sport; some forms are practiced for health reasons, other – for self-defense and a real fight; there are also multiple mixed forms combining the above mentioned aspects in different proportions.

However, the scientific objective approach allows us to notice the humanistic inspirations of martial arts – already at the level of philosophy. These values may be of key impor-

tance, particularly for young trainees. Eastern martial arts – unlike the traditional ones – give the trainees much more.

Firstly they very strongly utilize master's (teacher's) ethos, emphasizing his role, and thus, teaching to respect the authority. We should emphasize – a real authority, not created using artificial methods, based on the achievements, skills, knowledge and experience. Like other martial arts of Far Eastern provenience, karate very clearly separates the trainee's status from the master's status. This is manifested not only by the striking attire attributes, but also by time lapse necessary to pass the master's exam. Eastern martial arts – which is clearly visible in karate – use a very precisely defined structure expressing the trainee's achievements. The color of belt does not only indicate to what extent the trainee has mastered certain skills, it also indicates the trainee's position during dojo exercises. Between one color of the belt and another, the trainee has to pass the exam, in which the masters participate. It is impossible to overlook the effect of Zen philosophy on this phenomenon, the philosophy, which on one hand teaches to perceive the world objectively, ignoring the haphazard attitude towards the approved opinions, authorities and superstitions, on the other hand however, the master's function is spread on all possible domains. Western communities who would like to practice Zen face a serious dilemma due to insufficient information on Zazen, on how to start and continue their practice – the author of the book "Three Core Practices of Zen" wrote in despair. The contemporary mass culture is – for some reasons – perceived as accompanied by authority loss. Young people seeking for their identity are given a true master's authority in martial arts.

Master's ethos seems to emphasize the second feature – the respect for discipline, present in every aspect of karate. The obligatorily recited dojo oath, the kowtow showing respect towards the others, and following often harsh regime are part of discipline learning. This discipline is, first of all, understood as conscious self-control – taught and trained in the same way as habits and skills were taught and trained.

The third element is exotics, connected with multiple reference to the Japanese language, tradition and culture. It comprises commands in Japanese, names and often poetic symbols of J apan, as well as the reference to the Japanese precursors of different styles of martial arts.

We should not ignore another element of karate (also aikido, judo or kendo) – the uniform attire. For the trainees, apart from practical reasons, this is also the symbol of belonging to a specific group. The process of socializing is inseparably connected with general development of individuals, and its "regulatory" effect depends on one hand on the development of individuals and their isolate features, and on the other hand – on environment and social group characteristics (...) In the process of socializing, the relation between the social structure and personality development is clearly visible.

The mysterious Bruce Lee from the film directed over thirty years ago may still fascinate us. The cult of perfection and the syndrome of evolution every man has to undergo, or the necessity of body and mind development still impress us.

This phenomenon seems to be advantageous from the educational point of view as the times change, but the values are unchanged and universal.

## Scene three – "what an unfortunate hit"...

**The letters "The End" disappear, on the screen we can see the list of persons engaged in movie production. For the audience, there was one window with unsuccessful doubled scenes with Jackie Chan. During his daredevil acts, the actor did not manage to hit the chair and his fist struck the wall. The idol gave a painful grin – the spectators could see that he suffered enormous pain.**

Jackie Chan is quite different than the statuesque Bruce Lee. He also believes in the power of physical fitness and acrobatic performance. However, Bruce Lee was serious and Chan is a mocker. His distance towards himself and the practiced martial art is enormous – he is not ashamed to show his imperfection. Bruce Lee and the cheerful Jackie Chan represent two extremes of the same phenomenon, called "a cultural supermarket" by Gordon Mathews.

...although each of us identifies himself with the specific national culture, many people select from the wide spectrum of opportunities (or at least think they do) some life aspects of the global cultural supermarket, which are especially suitable for them. We may eat muesli with raisins for breakfast, vegetable curry for lunch and sashimi for dinner. We may listen to opera, jazz reggae or juju; we may be Christians, atheists, Buddhists or sufists. The mass culture of our global village offers us not only different national cuisines, but also multiple different cultural achievements from different world regions: French movie, Latino dances, or Japanese martial arts.

Generally, the transfer of cultural patterns is necessarily connected with translation of these patterns, as it happened with karate in Poland. The ambivalence of trends is an interesting phenomenon of karate organization manifestation: ... one tendency aims at making karate a future discipline of the Olympic Games (...) while the other one tends to preserve its classic form. In the first case, there are obstacles in a form of arguments and scandals present with karate organization, as well as the lack of conformity how the sport should look like, while in the second case the development of karate is. Many years have passed since the above quoted statement was written, and though we are now more likely to admit karate the status of an Olympic sport, the echoes of Tokarski's opinions still remain unchanged.

Regardless the arguments however, whether karate should be more a martial art or rather a sport, the condition of Polish karate is exceptionally good. Within thirty years, a vast infrastructure was developed, first on the basis of the Association for Physical Culture Propagation, and next through different sports clubs, performing important social functions. It offers its values according to the commercial criterion – non-dependent on government donations, but on the own choice of the individuals supporting this phenomenon

with their own bodies (through attending training sessions) and money (paying for training).

There are a lot of karate trainers, more than in other traditional sport disciplines, well prepared for their occupational tasks, verifying their skills every day in every part of our country. For these people this Eastern martial art is not only part of lifestyle, a tool of self-development, or a stepping stone in everyday life, but also an additional (or sometimes the main) source of income. Surprisingly, this has been achieved without the usual splendor, or financial support to make thousands of young people chose this discipline. And they achieved a lot thanks to their choice: physical fitness, satisfaction, the pleasure of self-development and team work. Many of them have developed their skills under different auspices: the army, police or sport.

This organizational preparation – despite the variety of methods, forms or styles is a very important alternative for contemporary school children and youth – health promoting, educative and mental. The significance of karate training has another very important aspect – educative – as an atypical, additional subject. The development of modern civilization resulted in our awareness of the uselessness of a single system of education and upbringing, showing a wide spectrum of educational opportunities we may take advantage of through our whole life. The first stage of education does not finish anything and opens the gate for further personal development.

If we consider a contemporary culture a "supermarket", we may risk the statement that our European civilization exceptionally often searches on the shelf with the "Far East" labels. Equally surprising seems the fact that the products on this shelf very often contain "pro-health" labels. We should not forget that the popular Feng Shui also comes from the Far East. Feng Shui teaches how to make use of the power derived from interior design. Many years ago I was fascinated with this old Chinese art, although Asian mentality seemed totally unfamiliar to me. The art of Feng Shui is obviously health oriented. Likewise is modern acupuncture, acupressure or mudras, very popular in Europe, called the methods of non-conventional medicine.

Equally popular are meditation, judo, karate, aikido or even the Japanese art of ikebana or bonsai planting. Harmony, attempts to perceive all, often sophisticated elements of the surrounding world as unity is part of eastern philosophy, which was once considered a remedy for all civilization-related problems of the western community. One of the most important traits of archery as it is practiced in Japan – which can be referred to all the arts of the Far east – is that the archer tends to achieve neither utilitarian purposes, nor the purely aesthetic satisfaction. The main goal of this sport is mental development, using other words – contact with the highest level of reality – such an attitude was described by Eugen Herrigel. The summing up could not be better.

## Conclusions

1. The basic motivating factor of Polish karate in its pro-health effect – both for parents and children/youth.
2. Like other martial arts, karate offers the trainees more than traditional sports do: the awareness of being part of a team, cultural background, symbols and philosophic fundamentals. At each stage of karate training, the trainee's evolution and future achievements are clearly visible.
3. In Poland, modern karate is not only a sport but also a lifestyle (and another source of income for trainers). It has evolved – also in mass culture -to become the sport practiced on a mass scale.

## References

1. Back to the Future III, the American directed by Robert Zemeckis, 1990.
2. Polish Karate Association official website- [www.karate.org.pl](http://www.karate.org.pl).
3. The same.
4. Internal statistics - Oyama Polish Karate Federation.
5. Krzysztof Habraszka fourth in Japan. In: Rzeczpospolita November 20th 2006, after Polish Press Agency.
6. Filipczuk H. Our children's friends. Warsaw: Nasza Księgarnia; 1983. p.49.
7. Memo Larousse Encyklopaedia. T. 8. Body and Health. Warsaw: Food, Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza; 1992. p. 1028.
8. Way of the Dragon (Meng long guojiang), film Hongkong, directed by Bruce Lee, 1972.
9. Bornoff N. Japonia. Warsaw: National Geographic; 2004. s. 58.
10. Tokarski S. Mobile Forms of Eastern Philosophy expression. Szczecin: Glob; 1989. p. 31.
11. Cynarski W. Reception and internalization of the far eastern martial arts ethos by the trainees. Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego; 2006. p. 324.
12. Cynarski W, Obodyński K, red. Humanistic theory of martial arts and martial sports. Concepts and problems. Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego; 2003.
13. Lewandowski E. Religion of the Far East. Łódź: Wydawnictwa Towarzystwa Krzewienia Kultury Świeckiej; 1986. p. 58.
14. Kapleau P. Three Core Practices of. Warsaw: Pusty Obłok; 1990. p. 21.
15. Mandal E. Psychological Analysis of Socializing Process. In: Heszen-Niejodek I, ed. Współczesne problemy socjalizacji. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego; 1995. p. 20.
16. First Strike, Australian film, Hongkong, Ukraina, USA, directed by Stanley Tong, 1996.
17. Mathews G. Global Culture, 2000.
18. Woźniak RB. Outline of Education and Social Behaviour Sociology. Volume II. Koszalin: Baltic University of Arts; 1997. p. 259.
19. Sator G. Feng Shui. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Bis; 2000. s. 5.
20. Herrigel E. Zen w sztuce łucznictwa. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Pusty Obłok; 1987. s. 5.

### Address for correspondence:

Adrian Piórko-Pawliński  
Komisja Badań Naukowych, Stowarzyszenie Idokan Polska  
Płotki, ul. Kasztanowa 18  
32-543 Myślachowice, Woj. małopolskie  
Tel. 604429105, e-mail: [adikpioro@poczta.fm](mailto:adikpioro@poczta.fm)



- This copy is for personal use only - distribution prohibited. - This copy is for personal use only - distribution prohibited. - This copy is for personal use only - distribution prohibited. - This copy is for personal use only - distribution prohibited.

*This copy is for personal use only - distribution prohibited.*

