What is Karate-Do: Sport, Self-Defense, or More?

There presently seems to be a schism in the world of traditional karate-do. Some instructors remain firmly committed to teaching karate-do as a means of self-defense while others are committed to promoting karate-do as an international sport. However, what does this emphasis on sport and on self-defense mean for the often quoted karate-do maxim: "The ultimate aim of karate lies not in victory or defeat but in the perfection of the character of its participants." It is particularly difficult to think of sport karate or self-defense without emphasizing the advantages of victory and the disadvantages of defeat. Ever since the end of the Second World War, karate has been evolving into an international sport, and in today’s society much of the emphasis of karate-do training is directed toward developing competitive athletes at the national and international levels. This is not surprising given the fact that today’s culture reveres the athlete. The top athletes of today are cultural icons who are extraordinarily well paid. Even some of our international "amateur" athletes often receive financial compensation for their victories in the form of stipends and commercial endorsements.

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The top athletes of today are cultural icons who are extraordinarily well paid. Even some of our international "amateur" athletes often receive financial compensation for their victories in the form of stipends and commercial endorsements. Today’s culture is fraught with the danger of being assailed. The printed and broadcast media is replete with stories of abductions and assaults. Protection against personal attack is very much on the minds of many people in our society, and as a consequence there has been a renewed emphasis on training in karate for the purpose of self-defense. Being victorious while defending oneself is obviously a desirable goal. However, this current emphasis on sport and self-defense causes one to question whether the ultimate purpose of karate-do is really found in seeking virtue and perfecting character. Are these lofty goals still relevant in today’s society, or are they quite simply quaint expressions which are representative of an era gone by? Let us investigate what the karate-do masters of both yesterday and today have to say on these issues. Sport with Virtue As we recall from earlier discussions, Mr. Gichin Funakoshi seemed to have envisioned a dual purpose for karate. He intended karate-do to remain a martial art; but he also intended it develop into a sport. He indirectly addresses karate as a sport infused with the virtue of Japanese budo in the first of his Twenty Precepts. Mr. Funakoshi advises the karate-ka to remember that "Karate begins and ends with courtesy." This precept is linked to the advice of Confucius who warned gentlemen to avoid certain types of sport competition. Confucius approved of competition for a gentleman only when "...he bows and exchanges civilities both before the contest and over drinks afterward... [In this manner], he remains a gentleman even in competition." In other words, a gentleman should engage in a sport only when it begins with courtesy and ends with courtesy. As we have already discovered Mr. Funakoshi was a Confucian scholar, and it is certain that he would have been aware of this advice. Hence, Mr. Funakoshi’s advised his students to be courteous throughout their training and in their actives afterward, and it appears as if Mr. Funakoshi approved of sport karate-do competition only so long as the virtue of courtesy prevailed. However, it is certain that Mr. Funakoshi would never have approved of the arrogance that some of our popular athletes exhibit with unseemly celebrations of victory and "in-your-face" intimidations which are all too prevalent is sports today. Defense by Virtue Karate developed as a means of self-defense whereby an unarmed person could defend himself against assailants. Consequently, it is not surprising to discover that the philosophy of Mr. Chojun Miyagi’s addresses the issue of self-defense. Mr. Morio Higaonna explains that Mr. Miyagi’s beliefs are expressed in a maxim of Goju Ryu: "The way of Goju-Ryu Karate-Do is to seek the way of virtue ... Therefore the ultimate strategy is to win, not by battle, but by virtue... Heighten one’s own virtue, master the strategy of winning without fighting, and seek the ultimate secret." This maxim and its explanation also seem to be derived from Confucianism. Simon Leys, a Confucian researcher, tells us that the avoidance of all direct confrontations was deeply imprinted on all of the peoples who studied Confucius and adhered to his teachings. Consequently, we see that the philosophy of Mr. Miyagi is also consistent with the teachings of Confucius. Both Confucius and Mr. Miyagi tell us to defeat conflict with virtue. Karate Instruction and Morality Today For Sensei Fumio Demura, one of the most respected of today’s traditional karate-do teachers, the concern for moral instruction is at the at the core of his karate-do teaching. Mr. Demura believes that teaching social morality within the context of teaching karate-do is particularly relevant in today’s society. He explains: "Many young people today do not get the moral and social education that the home used to provide." In order to compensate for the moral instruction which is sometimes lacking in the home environment, Mr. Demura aspires to improve the character of his students by instructing them in the ways of virtuous and courteous behavior: "I believe that character improvement through training is important...When I need to do something around the dojo like weed the parking lot or take out the trash, my students will join me and help with the work. When the black belts help out and show their humility, the younger students learn to follow their example. That’s my job; teaching kids to become harder workers, more serious about accomplishing their goals, [and] better adults." Mr. Demura’s students are learning virtue. They are being shown by their teacher and senior students how to become better people. Although their karate training includes lessons in developing a sporting attitude and learning self-defense, their karate training is more than just this. Their karate-do training is infused with valuable moral lessons designed to improve their character. Karate-Do Today A bridge can be built which unites the schism that divides those who

advocate karate for self-defense and those who promote karate for competition. That bridge is built by realizing that it doesn’t really matter which position one advocates as long as the improvement of character of the participants is the ultimate goal of karate training. In today’s society, one can become a karate athlete and compete at local, national, or international events. However, if one takes the advice of Mr. Funakoshi, then no matter where one competes, his or her actions should exemplify virtue and courtesy both during competition and in their endeavors after the competition is over. Moreover, one should compete in karate with the explicit goal of making oneself a better person who has a positive impact on society. In today’s society, one may find it necessary to prepare oneself in the techniques of self-defense. However, if one adheres to the advice of Mr. Miyagi, then while training for self-defense, one should simultaneously train in the moral strategy of winning without fighting. If one can master the art of self-defense without resorting to conflict, then a great personal and moral victory has been achieved. In today’s world, it does not matter if one engages in karate as a sport or if one engages in karate as a means of self-defense. If one is faithful to the advice of the karate masters both past and the present, then no matter whether one chooses karate as a sport or as self-defense then the ultimate goal of karate-do training is still to become a better person. Both paths lead to the same destination – the improvement of the character of the participant. This is the true essence of karate-do.