

The Road to Shodan

Essay Topic: The road to reaching your Shodan is not a linear one. For some people it is short and for others it is long. Reflect on what you perceived your journey would be when you began to this point now.

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To all the senseis, sempais, and kohais who have been part of my martial arts journey, thank you for your guidance, support, and camaraderie.

"Pressure makes diamonds. Do you want to be a diamond?"
- Christopher Voss

1 Introduction

The journey to Shodan in Goju Ryu Karate is a multifaceted experience, rich in lessons, challenges, and transformative growth. It is a path that extends far beyond the physical mastery of martial arts techniques, delving into personal development, philosophical understanding, and community engagement. As I reflect on this journey, I recognize that it encompasses not only the evolution of my skills in the dojo but also the shaping of my character and life philosophy. If I were to begin this journey again to this point now, I would have a different perspective, a deeper appreciation for the complexities and nuances of the martial arts path and proceeded on a more dedicated and mindful trajectory.

Section 2 outlines my personal journey with martial arts, from early encounters as a teenager to the rediscovery of the art in adulthood. It highlights the challenges, setbacks, and moments of inspiration that shaped my current path to now.

Section 3 explores an alternate path, if I were to restart my martial arts journey with the knowledge and insights gained along the way in my current life circumstances.

Section 4 identifies consistent themes that have guided my martial arts journey, providing a stable foundation amid the changing tides of training and life.

Section 5 delves into uncharted paths and future horizons, outlining aspects of my martial arts journey that remain unexplored and potential directions post-Shodan.

Section 6 explores the application of martial arts principles in business contexts.

2 My Story So Far

My journey with martial arts has been a winding path, marked by early encounters and a rediscovery in adulthood. As a teenager, martial arts brushed my life through family and friends: my best friend practiced Ninjutsu [13], my aunt was dedicated to Wado Ryu Karate [15] practitioner, and my dad had a stint in Judo. Even after moving from Germany to Canada, my casual tryst with a boxing bag for cardio hinted at a latent interest, yet it never truly captivated me.

2.1 The Early Encounters

It was not until grad school, at the age of 27 in 2009, that the martial arts world truly resonated with me. Inspired by the martial arts movies, I sought a fitness practice that offered more than

physical exertion and more purposeful engagement than monotonic gym routines. I was searching for purpose, guidance, and a sense of community. My search ended at the University of Waterloo's Karate Club [21], see Figure 1, where I found all three. Despite the on-and-off training dictated by my scholarship in grad school that required me to spend one term with the industry partner each year, the journey was enriching, filled with seminars, community engagements, and a slow but steady progress to a blue belt by 2012.



Figure 1: The University of Waterloo Karate Club around April 2011

2.2 The Hiatus

However, as life unfolded with its myriad responsibilities - graduation, marriage, starting a family, and entrepreneurship — the rigor of martial arts training slid to the background. At the same time the departure of my esteemed teacher furthered the disconnect, underscoring the irreplaceable value of excellent martial arts mentors. So for about 10 years after my blue belt, martial arts remained a dormant passion, a chapter that seemed closed forever.

2.3 The Reboot

The turning point came during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the first lockdowns were announced in early 2020 [19], I got a heavy boxing bag again and a set of crash mats, revisited old martial arts training videos, and followed online tutorials hosted by Taekwondo [1, 22], Karate [4], Judo [8], and Wushu [23] practitioners.

Starting martial arts training again as an older untrained person was really tough. Returning at nearly age 40, I faced a starkly different physical reality: almost 17 kg heavier, less flexible, and markedly less agile. What I had going for me was will power and in an odd way the time to dedicate myself to the art again in my garage as the world came to a halt during the lockdowns. Similarly, I feel that dedicated practitioners that were robbed off their Dojo time during the lockdowns and sought to hosting virtual seminars as an escape to keep their art going. When the lockdowns were lifted and my former university club hosted trial sessions, I decided to give it a shot again. My goal was simple: If I make it through the trial sessions, I will stick with through the term and see how it goes. I had two months to restart my training before hitting age 40, and I did. Not only did I survive, but I advanced through the ranks, regained lost technique, and slowly embraced the new, yet slower, learning curve. Capacity limits and sporadic further lockdowns made it hard to attend in-person classes after the initial contact.

Aside from the head instructor at the club there is a remarkable age difference between me and the other students. A lot of members that where lower belts (see Figure 1) when I left the club in 2012 had become black belts and had long tenures as instructors at this club or began teaching in other clubs or capacities. Aside from witnessing their journey, it was awe-inspiring how much energy and dedication every one put in to keep classes going and the club alive through such difficult times during the pandemic. If it were not for these challenging circumstances and their inspiration, I would likely have never found my way back to the dojo.

As the Shodan grading looms just two weeks away, my martial arts journey reflects a tapestry of life's lessons, embodied in the art of Karate. I hope I can be a worthy recipient of the black belt, a testament to the resilience and perseverance that others progressed through in this club.

3 An New Path

If I were to begin my martial arts journey again, knowing what I know now, I would approach it with a different mindset and focus. There are aspects that I would change or emphasize more, based on the lessons learned and experiences gained over the years. Here are some key elements that would shape my new path to Shodan if I were to start now.

In the coming sections of this essay, I will explore the transformative journey of my martial arts training, from initial motivations to current aspirations. Initially, my goal was simple: to find a better form of exercise. I focused on building physical strength and learning self-defense, without much thought for the deeper aspects of the martial arts. Surprisingly, I found myself part of a community that I had not actively sought but came to value immensely.

Over time, my approach and understanding evolved. I moved from hesitancy around sparring to embracing it as a crucial learning experience, recognizing that martial arts are not just about physical skills but also about testing them under pressure. I once imagined a straightforward path to achieving my black belt, but I have come to appreciate the journey's unpredictable nature, full of challenges and personal growth.

As I grew older, my physical capabilities changed, but I gained patience, resilience, and a deeper self-awareness. My life became busier, requiring me to develop skills in time management and prioritization. While I initially had no plans to teach or lead, I now feel a strong desire to give back to the community that has given so much to me.

Looking ahead, I remain committed to personal growth, self-improvement, and lifelong learning in martial arts. The constants in my journey—showing up, putting in the work, embracing challenges, and valuing the support of mentors and peers—remain my guiding principles.

These reflections set the stage for a deeper dive into each aspect of my journey, highlighting the lessons learned, the obstacles overcome, and the ongoing process of personal and martial development.

3.1 Evolving Motivations and Goals

When I first started my martial arts training, my main goal was pretty simple: I wanted a better way to exercise. I was not looking for any deep, life-changing experience; I just wanted to get fit and maybe learn some self-defense. I joined the Karate club without really thinking too much about what martial arts could mean beyond that. It was more about the physical workout than anything else.

As time went on, though, something changed. I began to see martial arts in a different light. It was not just about getting stronger or being able to defend myself. I started to appreciate the deeper aspects of the practice—the art, the philosophy, and the rich history behind each movement and technique. Martial arts became more than just a workout routine; it turned into a journey of self-discovery and learning.

Interestingly, I found a community almost by accident. I was not specifically looking for one, but as I spent more time in the dojo, training and interacting with others, I became part of a group that shared common interests and goals. This sense of belonging and shared purpose was something I had not anticipated but came to deeply value.

Now, my motivation for practicing martial arts is very different from when I started. It's not just about physical fitness or self-defense anymore. It's about a deeper appreciation for the art itself, the life lessons it teaches, and the community it brings me to. Martial arts have become a meaningful part of my life, offering a sense of connection and understanding that goes beyond the physical aspects of training.

3.2 Physical Challenges and Limitations

When I resumed my martial arts training, the physical challenges were immediately apparent compared to my younger self. Being older and out of training, I found myself heavier and less agile than in my younger days. My stamina had diminished, and movements that once felt natural were now strenuous. This physical reality was a stark contrast to my earlier years when youth provided a natural advantage in flexibility and endurance.

Yet, this physical transformation was only one part of the change. Mentally and emotionally, I experienced a significant shift. The initial frustration of not being able to perform as I once could turn into a lesson in patience and resilience.

This also becomes visible when training with much younger students who are also participating in the same class. Research shows that VO2 max, a measure of the body's ability to consume oxygen during exercise and a good marker for general fitness, decreases by about 1% per year after the age of 25 (see Attia [2]). This means that older adults have to work harder to maintain their fitness levels and may struggle to keep up with younger individuals in high-intensity

activities. Figure 2 shows the VO2 max bands by age.

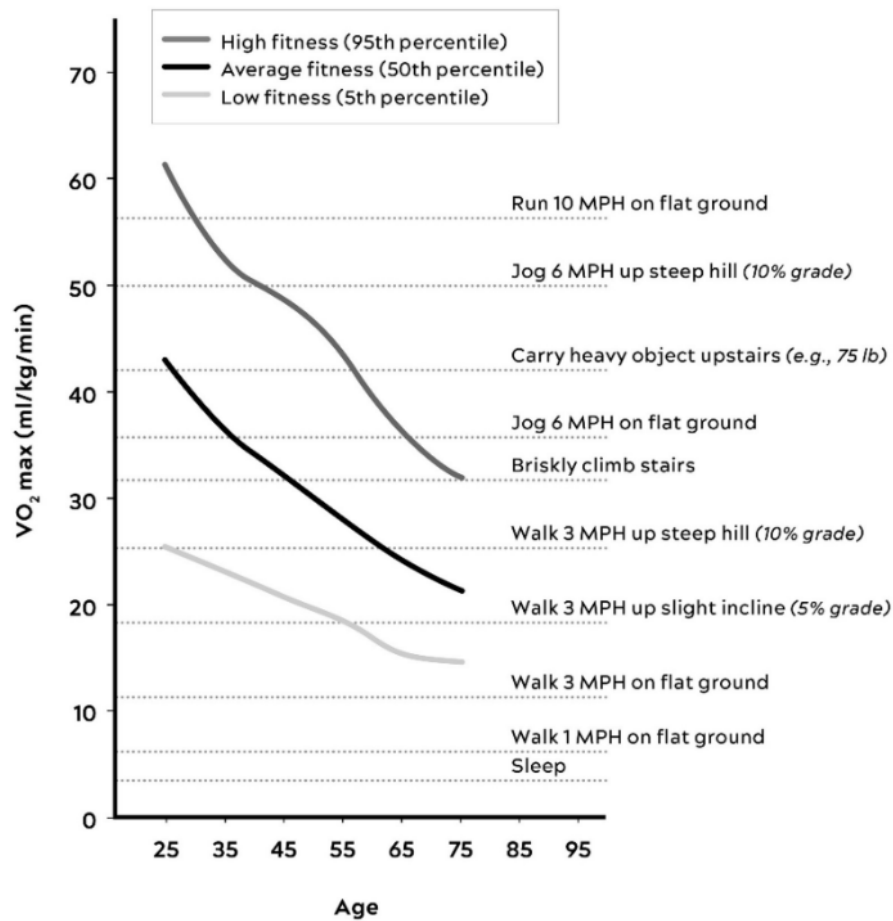


Figure 2: VO2 Max Bands by Age, from [2]

For me, this meant that I had to play and experiment with various forms of cross-training to keep up with the demands of the martial arts training. I learned to value supportive training exercises like strength training, flexibility work (see Kim [10]), and cardiovascular conditioning to improve my physical abilities. I experimented with various forms of exercise, from self-directed weightlifting and running to group fitness classes. For resistance training I tried traditional martial arts conditioning exercises (see Clarke [5] and Broussal-Derval [3]) as well as standard free weight training. In self-directed training, I could not reach the required intensity to materially improve my stamina, regardless of approach. It was not until I finally started discovering functional high intensity training that added a competitive group aspect like F45 [20] that I saw material improvements in cardiovascular fitness.

The other drawback one faces at higher age is the increased risk of injury and compared to younger peers longer recovery times. This is especially true for high-impact settings like Karate continuous sparring Kumite or Jiu-Jitsu sparring. Prone to injuries are the knees, shoulders,

lower back, fingers, as well as soft tissue injuries like sprains and strains. While sparing gear can help to mitigate some of the risks, it helps to further pad the joints and wear protective gear like knee braces or bracing pants. Further, I feel that Creatine supplementation has helped to improve my recovery times and reduce the risk of injury to ligaments and tendons (see Hall et al. [7]).

Overall, the process of returning to martial arts has been a transformative experience, reshaping not just my body but also my mind and spirit. It has taught me that personal growth is a continuous journey, one that requires not just physical effort but also mental and emotional commitment. If I were to start my martial arts journey again at my current age, I would have started with a more comprehensive strength and conditioning program to build a solid foundation and reduce the risk of injury. Then slowly build up the intensity of the training, Jiu-Jitsu and Kumite sparring.

3.3 Changing Perspectives on Kumite and Sparring

At the beginning of my martial arts journey, the idea of sparring, or Kumite, made me nervous. It felt intimidating to face an opponent in a match, even in a controlled environment like the dojo.

My early view was that real martial arts were shown in competitions or idealized combat scenarios, and I was not sure, I was ready for that.

Over time, my view on sparring changed dramatically. As I trained more and faced different opponents, I started to see sparring as a valuable learning tool, not just a test of strength or speed. It became clear that Kumite was about understanding timing, reading the opponent's movements, and applying techniques in real time. It was a way to put everything I learned into practice and see what worked and what did not.

Now, I actually look forward to sparring sessions. They are opportunities to learn and grow, to challenge myself and improve. Sparring has become a key part of my training, a way to explore and express martial arts in a dynamic, interactive setting. It's no longer just about competition or proving myself; it's about embracing the challenge, learning from each bout, and continuously refining my skills.

This shift in perspective has made me appreciate martial arts even more. I understand now that true martial artistry is not just displayed in formal competitions but also in the daily grind of training and sparring, where the real learning happens. Through Kumite, I have not only improved my physical techniques but also developed mental resilience and strategic thinking.

3.4 Balancing Responsibilities and Training

David McFarlane [12] made a great analogy about balancing responsibilities in life. As my martial arts journey progressed alongside my personal and professional life, I came to realize that balancing these aspects is much like juggling balls—some are rubber, able to bounce back if dropped, while others are glass, precious and fragile, demanding careful handling, that cannot come back if dropped.

In my early days as a grad student, most of what I juggled felt like a small set of rubber balls. Training sessions, academic deadlines, and personal commitments seemed manageable and, if

occasionally dropped, would not lead to long-lasting consequences. Martial arts training was a crucial part of my routine, yet it flexibly fit among other less critical activities.

However, as I transitioned into more significant life roles—becoming a parent, a spouse, and an entrepreneur—the stakes changed. These new responsibilities were like glass balls, where the cost of dropping them was much higher. Family time, raising children, and managing business ventures required delicate balancing, highlighting the importance of what could and could not be compromised.

This shift transformed how I approached martial arts training. It was no longer just about finding time; it was about integrating this passion into a life filled with glass balls. The discipline and focus I learned from martial arts became invaluable, helping me prioritize and manage my time more effectively.

While I would have loved to treat training sessions as a sacred glass ball, a non-negotiable part of my life, in reality with so many moving parts, it is still a rubber ball, bouncing back when dropped but always ready to be picked up. It can be momentarily be set aside and must still be continuously nurtured and protected. In this complex juggling act, martial arts remained a constant, a grounding force that taught me resilience, focus, and the art of maintaining balance in a constantly shifting landscape.

After my long hiatus from martial arts (see Section 2), I had to innovate on time management. With so many responsibilities I had to find timeslots that were not only available but also sustainable. This led me to embrace early morning training sessions, which not only helped me start the day with energy and focus but also ensured that I could fit in my training before the demands of the day took over see Sharma [17] for more details and inspiration.

Further dropping the rubber ball of training also means that there has to be a plan to stick to it and pick it up again without any overhead. I began to closely monitor my progress, journal, and employ techniques from for habit formation see Clear [6] for more techniques. My selection of tools includes journaling, combined with a daily goals worksheet and a weekly memento mori (Latin for 'remember that you [have to] die') calendar. Missed tracked habits should not span more than a day or two. By making this visual and tracking it, it becomes easier to pick up rubber balls again in the daily juggling act. The real efficiency of good habits and related support systems shows on bad and busy days. It becomes paramount to identify Resistance (see Pressfield [14]) and work through it and remembering that there is no advancement without putting in the work (see Schwarzenegger [16]).

If I were to start my martial arts journey again, I would approach it with a more structured and disciplined mindset, integrating it seamlessly into my daily routine and ensuring that it remains a priority amidst other responsibilities. This becomes paramount when you have to balance the demands of work, family, and personal life, and martial arts at the same time. This is a very different setting than when I was a student and had all the flexibility to attend seminars and training sessions.

3.5 Role in the Martial Arts Community

In the beginning, my journey in martial arts was mostly about me: getting fit, learning self-defense, and enjoying the personal challenge. I did not think much about teaching others or being a leader in the martial arts community. It was all about what I could learn and how I could

improve.

But as time went on, my perspective changed. After years of training and experiencing the ups and downs of martial arts, I started to see things differently. I realized that martial arts weren't just a personal journey; they were also about being part of a community, a group of people sharing the same passion and goals.

Now, I feel a strong desire to give back to this community that has given me so much. I want to help others learn and grow, just like my mentors and peers helped me. Teaching and mentoring have become important parts of my martial arts life. They are ways I can contribute and help maintain the spirit and traditions of our practice.

Being a part of the martial arts community means more than just showing up for my own training. It is about supporting others, sharing knowledge, and helping to create a positive and nurturing environment for everyone. This role is something I now value deeply, and it has enriched my experience in martial arts far beyond what I initially imagined.

If I were to start my martial arts journey again, I would place more emphasis on being an active member of the community from the beginning. I would have sought out opportunities to help others, share my knowledge, and contribute to the growth and development of the dojo. Especially the survival of the club during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how important it is to have a strong community that supports each other. The 2021 and 2022 grading attendance proved that the club has a strong community with excellent leadership, despite the challenges of the pandemic, see Figure 3.



Figure 3: University of Waterloo Karate and Jiu-Jitsu Club Grading Fall 2022

3.6 Perceptions of Progression and Reality

When I first started in martial arts, I thought my progress would be straightforward. I imagined moving up the ranks smoothly, learning new techniques easily, and getting my black belt in a set amount of time. This view made me see martial arts training as a straight path where effort directly translated to advancement.

However, as I spent more time training, I realized that my journey was not going to be a straight line. Instead, it was full of ups and downs, moments where I felt stuck and times when I suddenly broke through barriers. I learned that progress in martial arts is not just about collecting belts or mastering techniques quickly; it is about personal growth, overcoming challenges, and continually improving, even if it is not always visible.

Now, I see progress in martial arts as a non-linear path. It is normal to have periods where it feels like I'm not getting any better, followed by times when everything starts to click.

This understanding has helped me appreciate each step of my journey, knowing that every practice, every repetition, and every sparring session contributes to my growth, even if it is not immediately obvious.

My perception of progress has evolved from focusing on outward achievements or to some degree envy of others to valuing the deeper, more personal aspects of growth in martial arts. It is about becoming better than I was yesterday, learning from every experience, and understanding that the journey is as important as the destination.

4 Consistent Themes

Throughout my martial arts journey, certain themes have remained constant, shaping my experience and guiding my growth. These enduring elements reflect the core of what martial arts are about for me. That I would not change if I were to start my journey again.

Personal Growth and Self-Improvement: My martial arts journey has been about more than just physical training. It's been a path to personal development, teaching me discipline, patience, and resilience. Even as my motivations and circumstances have changed, the goal of bettering myself has stayed the same. This pursuit of self-improvement has been a driving force, pushing me to keep training and learning.

Lifelong Learning: Martial arts have taught me that learning never stops. There's always a new technique to master, a new aspect of the philosophy to understand, or a new challenge to overcome. This continuous learning process has kept me engaged and curious, ensuring that my journey remains dynamic and rewarding.

Consistency and Dedication: Showing up for class, practicing regularly, and staying committed even when progress seems slow have been key to my journey. This consistency and dedication have helped me build a solid foundation in martial arts, allowing me to advance and grow over time.

Embracing Challenges: My martial arts path has been filled with challenges, from physical obstacles to balancing training with life's other demands. Facing and overcoming these challenges has been essential to my development, teaching me about my own strength and resilience.

Valuing Community and Mentorship: Being part of the martial arts community and having the support of mentors and peers have been crucial. This network of guidance, support, and

camaraderie has not only enhanced my skills but also provided a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

These consistent themes have been the backbone of my martial arts journey, providing a stable foundation as I navigated the various phases of my training and life. They highlight the enduring values and lessons that martial arts have offered, making my journey rich and fulfilling.

5 Uncharted Paths and Future Horizons

As I approach the milestone of my Shodan grading, I reflect on certain aspects of my martial arts journey that remain less explored, areas I wish I had delved into more deeply but couldn't due to time constraints or other priorities. These uncharted paths represent both missed opportunities and potential future directions for my practice beyond Shodan.

Advanced Technical Mastery: While I've built a solid foundation in the basic and intermediate techniques, I've often longed to push further into the advanced technical aspects of martial arts. Post-Shodan, I aim to dedicate more time to mastering complex katas and nuanced combat strategies, enhancing my skill set to new levels.

Cross-Training in Other Martial Arts: My exposure to various martial arts has been limited, and I've always been curious about how other styles complement and contrast with my training in Karate. Exploring disciplines like Jiu-Jitsu, Judo, or a different more sparring-focused Karate style could offer fresh perspectives and new challenges, enriching my understanding and appreciation of martial arts as a whole.

Mindfulness and Meditation: Although martial arts practice is inherently mindful, I've often overlooked the dedicated practice of meditation and mindfulness as separate pursuits. Going forward, I want to integrate these practices more fully into my routine to enhance mental clarity and focus, both in the dojo and in daily life.

Pursuing WKF Judge Qualifications [18]: An aspect of my martial arts journey I wish to expand on is becoming more involved in the competitive side of the sport, specifically through training to be a World Karate Federation (WKF) judge for sparring. This goal reflects a desire not only to understand the nuances of martial arts competition more deeply but also to contribute to the integrity and fairness of the sport. Being a judge would allow me to play an instrumental role in facilitating and promoting martial arts competitions, ensuring that they are conducted with respect, precision, and adherence to the sport's values and rules. This pursuit aligns with my broader vision of giving back to the martial arts community and helping to nurture the next generation of martial artists.

Attending Advanced Seminars: Another path I aim to pursue more vigorously post-Shodan is attending advanced seminars led by renowned martial artists. These seminars are invaluable for honing advanced skills and gaining insights from masters of the art. My goal is to absorb as much knowledge and technique as possible from these gatherings and bring these learnings back to the university club, which often experiences high turnover due to graduating students. By doing so, I can help ensure continuity and the transfer of advanced knowledge within the club. This continuous learning and sharing cycle will not only enrich my own martial arts journey but also fortify the club's foundation, making it a robust training environment that thrives on shared knowledge and communal growth.

In contemplating these uncharted paths, I see a future rich with opportunities for growth, exploration, and contribution. Achieving Shodan is not the end of the journey but a gateway to these expansive horizons, offering new avenues for deepening my practice and broadening my impact within the martial arts world.

6 Beyond Martial Arts - A Business Perspective

Beyond martial arts foundational principles find applications in business sectors as well. The discipline, focus, and teamwork cultivated in martial arts training can be translated into valuable skills for professional environments.

For example, principles practiced in the Dojo seem to resonate with concepts in Total Quality Management (TQM) and Lean Management, such as the Toyota Manufacturing System (TMS) (see Liker [11]) and the 5S methodology (see Hirano [9]).

Continuous Improvement - Kaizen (改善)

- Karate Principle: In Karate, there is a continuous pursuit of mastery and improvement, emphasizing consistent practice and refinement of techniques.
- Business Application: This aligns with the Kaizen philosophy in TMS, where the focus is on continuous, incremental improvement of processes, reducing waste, and increasing efficiency.

Discipline and Order - Dojo Kun (道場訓)

- Karate Principle: The Dojo Kun teaches discipline, respect, and commitment, encouraging practitioners to maintain order and follow a set of ethical guidelines.
- Business Application: This mirrors the 5S methodology (Sort, Set in order, Shine, Standardize, Sustain), promoting organizational efficiency, safety, and a systematic approach to work.

Focus and Clarity - Kime (決め)

- Karate Principle: Kime refers to the focus and energy concentration in executing techniques, highlighting the importance of clarity and purpose in each action.
- Business Application: In business, particularly within TMS, having a clear focus on goals, process clarity, and precise execution leads to effective outcomes and reduced errors.

Respect and Teamwork

- Karate Principle: Karate teaches respect for others, collaboration, and working together to achieve common goals, essential in dojo training and competitions.
- Business Application: Respect for people is a core component of TMS, fostering teamwork, collaboration, and mutual trust, which are crucial for successful business operations.

Preparedness and Adaptability - Mushin (無心)

- Karate Principle: Mushin, or the “mind without mind,” refers to a state of open awareness and readiness to adapt, characteristic of experienced martial artists.
- Business Application: In the context of TMS and business management, being prepared and adaptable to changes in the market or operational challenges is vital for sustaining competitiveness and innovation.

By integrating these Karate principles into business practices, leaders and teams can enhance their operational efficiency, improve team dynamics, and foster a culture of respect, continuous improvement, and excellence. The correlation between martial arts discipline and business management principles like those in TMS and 5S can provide a robust framework for achieving both personal and organizational success.

7 Summary

As the Shodan grading nears, reflecting on my martial arts path reveals a transformative journey from physical fitness to a deeper engagement with the art’s philosophy and community. This transition has enriched my understanding and practice, showing me that martial arts encompass far more than just the technical skills.

If I were to restart my journey to Shodan now, I would make changes and maintain other consistent practices thought.

Key shifts in my journey include moving from initial apprehension to embracing the challenges of sparring, recognizing the nonlinear nature of progress, and learning to balance the demands of personal life with the discipline of martial arts training.

These experiences have not only shaped my approach to martial arts but also prepared me for future roles, including mentoring within the community and possibly judging in competitions.

Looking ahead, I see a landscape ripe with opportunities for deeper exploration, technical mastery, and community contribution in the dojo, personal and business life.

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