Ryan practising karate. Photo courtesy of the author.
My Kuro-Obi (black belt), hard-earned through more than thirty years studying Shotokan Karate, embodies my connection with Japan—a country, a people and a culture that I have a deep fondness and admiration for.

Karate is a Japanese martial art, developed in the Ryukyu Kingdom (modern-day Okinawa). The art was introduced to mainland Japan by Gichin Funakoshi in 1922, following his demonstration to the Crown Prince of Japan, and the first Shotokan Dōjō (training hall) was established in Tokyo in 1936. Shotokan Karate is named after Funakoshi’s pen name, Shoto, which means waving pines.

Practitioners of Karate (or Karateka) wear a white canvas kimono, which we call a Gi. The Gi jacket is fastened around the waist by a coloured belt, which also serves to denote rank. In Shotokan Karate we have ten ranks below black belt (known as Kyu grades), and ten black belt ranks (known as Dan grades). The colour belt system was introduced about a hundred years ago, prior to which Karateka wore either a white or a black belt. Grading from white to yellow, orange, green, purple and brown belts, gives students a sense of progression, until proficiency in the basic principles of the martial art is signified by a black belt.

It is interesting to note that, rather than saying ’I have a black belt’, Karateka tend to say ’I am a black belt’—but what does it mean to be a black belt?
more than just a fighting art. Everything I have been taught has been presented within a moral and ethical framework of respect, discipline and self-control. Karate is also a way of life. Our style’s founder, Hirokazu Kanazawa, characterises Karate as the way of harmony. He explained to me that:

‘First, you must train to develop harmony within yourself as an individual: your arms must move in harmony with your legs; your left side must move in harmony with your right side. Then, you should train with others to develop harmony with your opponent, for example by matching their timing; in this same way you can develop harmony with other people in your life. Finally, when you train you should push your head up to achieve harmony with the ground; and so we should strive to live in harmony with our environment and with the earth. Making harmony with the principles of the universe and nature is the philosophy of Karate-dō [the way of Karate].’

For me, the act of tying on my black belt is less about preparing to fight than it is about rising to the far greater challenge of training, interacting and living in harmony with my environment and those around me. As Australians, we live in a richly diverse multicultural society, so it is vital that we, and our children, develop an appreciation for cultures other than our own. This is the value I hope to instil in every man, woman and child that enters my Dōjō—irrespective of whether they train for only one session, or if they make it to black belt and beyond.

I remember that when I received this belt at the age of sixteen, it had a silken black lustre that set it apart from the dull cotton used to fashion the various coloured belts I had been wearing for the first ten years of my Karate journey. Now, after more than twenty years of further training, the shine has faded, and the black silken threads are tearing away to reveal a white cotton core—I am returning to the white belt of a beginner! And so my belt reflects my Karate journey: the relentless pursuit of unattainable perfection.
Ryan van Leent began training in Shotokan Karate at the age of six, and has been instructing students in this quintessentially Japanese martial art for over twenty years. He was graded to Godan (5th Degree Black Belt) by Grandmaster Hirokazu Kanazawa in 2009, and was selected to referee the final matches of the Shotokan Karate World Championships in 2012 and 2016.

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