

# Strength

## Inner, Outer, and Everything In-between

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I consider myself a fairly strong person. But upon thinking this I found that strength itself is a simple, yet complex word to define as it can be made up of two parts: inner and outer. So, what makes a person strong? The thesis I present here as a requirement for my Black Belt describes my findings, as well as my own interpretation of inner and outer strength and how I turned to karate to build mine.

Now, I didn't always consider myself a strong person. To me, strength isn't something that continuously builds throughout your life. I believe it is a journey; something that comes and goes depending on what life throws at you. I was dealt an extremely difficult hand upon losing my mom. She was a second-degree black belt at Bob White's Karate Studio and the strongest person I knew. After she passed away, I felt like I lost part of myself and a sense of belonging. I turned to the karate studio seeking a connection to her, perhaps memories that I could lean on to pull me through, but ended up finding a strength in me that lifted me up and reminded me of my mom more than any memory could.

When I first walked through the studio doors those years ago, I was immediately welcomed into a community that is hard to describe. I am not a religious person, but I would imagine it is how people feel about places of worship. It gave me a sense of security. My mom left me this place where I knew that no matter what, I had somewhere to go and I would be welcomed by people who cared and supported me; a second family. Having this strong foundation gave me the ability to grow into who I am today, starting from the inside, out.

But I have been tested more than once, and there came another point in my life where I had the rug pulled out from under me and felt I had lost all stability. Emotionally knocked down and beaten, I instinctively turned to karate to build myself back up again and give me the strength I needed to persevere. Looking back, I find it interesting that I turned to such a physical sport for this. When seeking something to help build up my inner strength, why would I turn to something that you would think builds on your outer strength? I don't know, but that's something I wanted to figure out.

Being "Karen Davis' daughter" I knew I could never fill my mother's shoes, but having that legacy made me work even harder and I know I am stronger for it today. However, this did not come easy. As a woman in Kenpo I first had to overcome smaller obstacles that a man may never have to: the embarrassment of a loud kiai because it's not "ladylike", feeling awkward doing techniques with male partners, being aggressive, the fear of getting hurt. Yet once I passed these mental limitations, I became more assertive and confident. I had gained this

newfound respect for myself that eventually translated into how I carried myself both inside and outside of karate.

Whether it's negotiating a new salary, standing after receiving a hard hit in sparring class, or showing up when you just don't feel like it; no matter what the scenario, you are being tested and I believe your outer strength represents how your inner strength translates into actions. With that being said, only through inner strength can you achieve outer strength and both of mine are consistently put to the test through karate.

With just 19 days to go, my first black belt test date was cancelled due to COVID-19. I was disappointed, angry, sad, and about 100 other things. Not to mention everything I was feeling surrounding the pandemic itself; fear, confusion, isolation. I had been training for this day for years and was so close before having it disappear with no new date in sight. But what would it look like when it eventually did get re-scheduled? Can people go? Will we have to modify it? I had to come to terms with the fact that this day I had dreamed about for half my life, might not be how I always envisioned it. I felt knocked down once again.

So, what did I do? I threw myself into karate; I persevered. I used all of the inner strength I had gained and turned it into action. Classes turned into Zoom meetings on my laptop, propped on my kitchen counter in my tiny studio apartment, trying to achieve perfect foot position while ignoring the pile of laundry that needed to be folded in the corner. Private lessons turned into hours of review on the weekends in the park under direct sunlight, smelling like SPF 50 and getting turned around every time I had to go to a 45-degree angle. Conditioning turned into 17-mile bike rides a day, bad tan lines, and some serious Kenpo awareness dodging pedestrians on the beach bike path. I was willing to do whatever it took to be ready when the time came, and I believe that right there is a representation of how strong I am on the outside.

I have been told throughout my training, "You're not going through anything that all other black belts didn't have to go through in preparation for their test". Except I have. My test will be unlike any one Mr. White has given to date; outdoors, masks on, 6-feet apart, minimum attendance. I thought because of COVID forcing me to train in such unusual circumstances it put me at a disadvantage come test day, but now I know it's just the opposite. It added a whole other level to my training, to my strength, that I never could have expected.

But what about people who don't do karate? Or maybe they do and just don't share the same ideas on the subject as I do. Having gone through this journey, it got me wondering what other people's interpretations were on inner and outer strength. So, I asked. "Desire to persevere"; "Thought process"; "Doing the right thing despite peer pressure". When asking about inner strength, most people felt it relied heavily on knowing who you were as a person and was measured by your attitude. That no matter what, you stay true and never waver. It didn't matter how tough you were physically or whether or not you cried, but by "the fortitude you have within yourself to be able to move through the ups and downs life gives you".

Many answered, “with faith”. That inner strength wasn’t something they believed they could achieve alone, but only through their relationship with the lord. Readings in the bible and remembering the fact that God will never leave or forsake them, gave them inner strength and peace of mind. “Fear is the driver of not feeling peaceful and when you find yourself in fear, you’ve really fallen out of having trust and faith with the lord.”

When inquiring about outer strength, I was surprised that some of the answers I would anticipate receiving from a martial artist, came from someone outside the art and vice versa. I was expecting a lot more to go for the obvious choice of it being strictly physical. Those who did, explained it as their muscle and endurance; something built upon through weights and conditioning.

Though the majority didn’t think it was physical at all, rather, how you respond to things and carry yourself in an observable way. “A reflection of your inner strength”. I found this very similar to my own meaning of what I believe outer strength represents. Could be a matter of stopping and helping someone or showing grace through a confrontation. It’s “what you show to the world during times of adversity.”

One interviewee thought the complete opposite of me. They found that only through outer strength can you achieve inner strength. He explained that by doing everything you can externally to prepare yourself for a challenge: discipline, fitness, drills; you develop an expertise, and with that comes confidence. If you don’t push through and do everything you can, it will plant the seed of self-doubt, and doubt will weaken your inner strength. “You have to coach yourself through” which in the end, will cause your inner strength to match up to your outer strength.

So, what makes a person strong? My final interview was with my mom through her very own black belt thesis “Women in Kenpo”, where she spoke about how the knowledge women gain from learning self-defense gives us a sense of power. That hard work translates into success, which translates even further into a great pride of accomplishment. “I believe one of the most important parts in teaching a woman what she must ultimately learn from Karate: no matter what someone had done or is doing to you, you don’t quit.” I won’t.

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