

Returning

Many years ago I trained in Shotokan karate under Sensei Simon Budden in Southampton. I'd been convinced to go along by a friend at school and after the first lesson, I was hooked. Not the most coordinated, nor the most elegant, I eventually attained my 4th kyu purple and white belt. This meant the world to me, but soon after, at the age of 17 I discovered going out to pubs and boys, both of which ate into my 'going to karate' time. I stopped going altogether, caught in a cycle of feeling unfit and unhealthy, not wanting to go to the dojo having forgotten parts of my katas. This turned out to be a huge mistake - the extent of which I didn't fully realise for about 8 years.

In those first few years after leaving my dojo and going to college and university, I lost all of my fitness and put on a lot of weight. I was completely inactive for a long time and hated it – but I seemed powerless to change it. One day I caught myself thinking of 'mokuso' - the few moments of calming contemplation I had experienced at the beginning and end of each training session years before. For some reason, when this memory hit me I knew I had to go back. So I started to eat better and upped my exercise. Soon, I was in a fit enough state to summon up enough courage to get back to karate - an internet search revealed that Sensei Simon had started teaching Gojo-ryu years earlier so I looked for a Sheffield-based dojo in that style. I found Sheffield Hallam Dojo and went along one evening, not really knowing what to expect.

What I got was a friendly group of people practising high quality karate. I've been here around two years now and despite finding it hard work (all those 'soft' and 'heavy' movements; I have no idea how everyone manages to make that look so easy!) it's one of the best things I've ever done. I'm still uncoordinated, still far from elegant, and find star jumps make me feel sick after a while - but I spend each lesson smiling and cheerful, because everyone here is understanding and encouraging. Everyone at the dojo, from black belt to white belt, wants each other to succeed and do well. It is a wonderful feeling. I feel much loyalty to this new family and hope that one day I can repay the kindness and patience that they have all shown me since I started.

When 'seiza, mokoso' is announced at the beginning of each session, I close my eyes knowing that it doesn't matter that I lost focus all those years ago, it matters that I am here now and giving it a go again. This time, I can't imagine being easily distracted from training - and I have Sensei Andy Barker and the other karateka at Sheffield Hallam Dojo to thank for that.