

## Karate-do; An Art and a Way

Most people do not equate *Karate* with *Academics*. In their mind's eye, they see visions of fighting men using vicious techniques trying to kill one another. How then, did karate go from being an obscure art form to a common household word?

In truth, karate was developed by highly intelligent and well educated warrior scholars that that were forced by circumstance to become living weapons. Karate is an art born out of necessity on the island kingdom of Okinawa, in the Ryukyu Archipelago. Its origins are lost in the mists of time, but we are told that a prohibition edict on weapons was given by the ruling Sho dynasty in around the year 1477. It was then re-issued by the conquering Japanese Satsuma samurai in 1609. Because of this double prohibition, the warrior class of Okinawa had to devise a system of self-defense and offense without weapons to protect the people. For centuries karate was a secret art taught only to the royal guard and the aristocracy of the island kingdom. With the Meiji restoration in 1868, the Shogun resigned and the government began to change to a more democratic system. It took a while for it to happen, but eventually karate made its way into the public school system at the turn of the twentieth century.

Although we can find earlier documents on the subject, the first real books of on karate were written by Gichin Funakoshi. Standing at a height of only five feet, he would in later years become a giant in the world of karate. Some of his contemporaries claimed that he was not a very good fighter. That when push came to shove, he would lose in a real fight. This might have been true, but those men are now but footnotes in history. Funakoshi on the other hand is known by almost all karate practitioners regardless of what style or in what country they study.

He began his career as a Schoolteacher in the port city of Naha. His early studies of the Chinese classics gave him this window of opportunity to become a teacher, when the feudal system ended and Okinawa officially became part of Japan. Later he turned down a job as a principle in a school on the outer islands in order to stay close to his karate teachers. After karate became known to the public, he organized a group of karate masters who traveled throughout Okinawa to give demonstrations of the art. In 1921 the Crown Prince of Japan, who would soon become the Emperor Hirohito, made a stop on Okinawa during a world tour. Funakoshi was given the exalted task of developing a demonstration of karate in the Great Hall of Shuri Castle for the prince. The prince later wrote that he was impressed by three things in Okinawa; the lovely scenery, the Dragon Drain of the Magic Fountain in Shuri Castle, and the art of karate.

Funakoshi retired his post as a schoolteacher and dedicated his life to the art of karate. Previously in 1917 he had been asked by the Okinawan Ministry of Education to travel to Kyoto and demonstrate karate at the Butoku-den, which at that time was the official center of all martial arts. At that time karate was considered little more than a side show from the backwater island of Okinawa. Now that the Crown Prince had written about the karate, the general public of Japan was curious about this obscure art. In 1922 the first National Athletic Exhibition was held in Tokyo. Okinawa was invited to send a representative to demonstrate karate. At that time the martial arts were very important to the athletic community, and the choice of studying kendo or judo was compulsory to all male students.

The Okinawan karate masters knew that in order for karate to be truly accepted by the outside world that it would need an ambassador. Funakoshi was the obvious choice. Not because he was the most proficient in the art. He wasn't, not by a long shot. He was chosen because of his

academic background. He spoke the Japanese language fluently and was familiar with their customs, culture, and politics. He was an articulate speaker and was known for his beautiful calligraphy. He was 53 years old and president of the Okinawan Shobukai (Martial Spirit Promotion Society).

As he sailed to Japan and into history, he composed the following poem;

*“On the island in the sea to the south,  
There is transmitted an exquisite art.  
This is karate.  
To my great regret,  
The art has declined  
And its transmission is in doubt  
Who would undertake  
The monumental task of  
Restoration and Revival?  
This task I must undertake;  
Who would if I do not?  
I vowed to the blue sky.”*

*Shoto*

He signed the poem with his pen name ‘Shoto’ that he used on all his Chinese poems. After he concluded his demonstration of kata (Kusanku and Naihanchi) and oratory, Funakoshi planned to return to Okinawa, but fate intervened. He was invited to teach at the famed Kodokan Judo hall by its founder, Jigoro Kano. Soon he was deluged by offers to stay and teach the art at a number of other venues. He was asked by the famous artist, Hoan Kosugi, to write a reference book in case he did return home. Funakoshi said that he would if Kosugi would provide a cover for it. Kosugi eventually designed the famous Shotokan Tiger that has become the symbol of Funakoshi’s style of karate.

*Ryukyu Kempo: Karate* was published at the end of 1922 with line drawings depicting the techniques of the art. The next year the great kanto earthquake destroyed the printing plates of the book. In 1926 it was re-issued as *Rentan Goshin Karate-jutsu* (Strengthening of Willpower and Self-defense through the Techniques of Karate). In this publication the techniques were depicted with photographs of Funakoshi performing the kata and kumite.

Funakoshi was invited to use Hakudo Nakayama’s kendo *dojo* (the place to study the way) for his classes. Nakayama was a famous kendo sensei and is considered the founder of modern *Iaido* (now known as Muso Shinden Ryu). This elevated Funakoshi’s status in the eyes of the Japanese who now no longer considered him a foreigner. On March 20, 1928 he was invited to demonstrate karate for the Imperial Household in the Saineikan on the palace grounds.

Funakoshi knew that for karate to survive he had to appeal to the academic elite. Soon he was invited to start karate clubs at the Keio, Tokyo, Takushoku, Chuo, Hitotsubashi, Gakushuin, Hosei, Nihon, Meiji, and other Universities (today there are over 200 collegiate karate clubs in Japan).

In 1936 the *Karate-do Kyohan* (Empty Hand Way, Master Text) was published. This was the first time he used the term ‘*Empty Hand*’ instead of ‘*China Hand*’ as the meaning for kara-te. These two terms are both pronounced *Kara* in Japanese. It was Japan’s increased nationalism at the time that made him make the change. He also focused on the arts more philosophical aspects

and signified it by adding the suffix *do* (pronounced *doe*). The kata movements became more stylized and more of a challenge to perform. The names of the kata were changed and the techniques made less dangerous. In 1939 his students organized a committee to build the first free standing karate dojo. Over the door was a sign that read 'Shoto-kan' (the Hall of Shoto). Knowing that Funakoshi was a very humble man, his students used his pen name instead of his given name. In 1945 the dojo was destroyed when Tokyo was bombed by American planes.

Funakoshi continued to write throughout his long life. In 1943 he published the *Karate-do Nyumon* (Passage through the Gates of the Karate Way). In 1951 the Strategic Air Command used Japan as its base to fight the Korean War. Pilots were trained in karate and other martial arts so that they had the endurance to fly twelve hour missions over Korea. In 1953 Funakoshi was approached by the US government and asked to travel to US bases in Asia to demonstrate and teach American Forces. He was also asked to send representatives to the United States for the same reason. His last book was a compilation of his newspaper articles describing his life and which became his autobiography; *Karate-do, My Way of Life*. Funakoshi died in 1957 at the age of almost 90 years when the average mortality rate was 65.

***“The ultimate aim of the art of Karate lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of its participants”***

### **Gichin Funakoshi**

In 1973 (the year I began my own study of karate) his book *Karate-do Kyohan* was translated in to English by Tsutomu Oshima. All of Funakoshi's books have been translated into English and many other languages since that time.

Some people study karate to participate in tournaments and never even crack a book. I encourage the readers of this article to seek out these books to give themselves a more rounded understanding of the art and way of karate. Today there are thousands of books on the subject of karate. Some are written by master scholars while others are written by charlatans. As in anything else, let the buyer beware. I also recommend books on karate technique written by Morio Higaonna and Shoshin Nagamine. For the history of the art, look for books by Randall Hassell, Patrick McCarthy, and Mark Bishop.

The famous samurai warrior, artist, and author Miyamoto Musashi believed in '*Bun Bu Ichi*' (the literary arts and the martial arts are one). When my son was reaching his school years, I realized that my penmanship had declined. I remembered that the warriors of Japan and Okinawa were men of letters. They did their martial arts training during the day, and in the evening they spent hours reading and practicing their calligraphy. In order to be a good father, I started practicing writing in both block letters and cursive. Now I find myself returning to this practice for the sake my Grandchildren.

Gordon Fisher