

THE WAY OF SHOTOKAN



**AN ESSAY ON THE
EVOLUTION OF THE
SHOTOKAN STYLE OF
KARATE**

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*TO SEARCH FOR THE OLD IS TO UNDERSTAND THE
NEW.*

THE OLD, THE NEW, THIS IS A MATTER OF TIME.

IN ALL THINGS MAN MUST HAVE A CLEAR MIND.

*THE WAY: WHO WILL PASS IT ON STRAIGHT AND
WELL?*

Gichin Funakoshi, 1868 - 1957

The Early Development of Karate as a Martial Art

Violence, as seen in the form of competition for land and food, was a major driving force behind many of early man's actions taken to create workable societies. As humans faced conflicts with their environments and with each other they developed methods of self defense in order to survive.

With time the environment would change creating the necessity for adaptability among the human race, especially to adapt methods of defense, in order to survive. To create and adapt methods of defense through the use of materials readily available in the environment is the root of martial arts. Karate is a supreme example of a martial art developed through the use of whatever was available to people during all stages of human history because karate relies upon the person alone - upon an "empty hand".

During the early part of the fourteenth century Chinese peasants were faced with a political situation which felt it necessary to outlaw all methods of self defense in order to maintain control. Since this ban included both weapons and chuan fa (Open Hand) methods of defense it is evident that by this time the "empty-hand" way of protecting oneself was viewed as a valid martial art.

With its use banned the practitioners of early karate found it necessary to go underground. Many went behind the walls of the Shaolin monasteries where their skills became refined into definite patterns of movements and training. In fact the movements became specialized enough during this time period so that they could be classified into the five different animal groups recognized by the Chinese at this time.

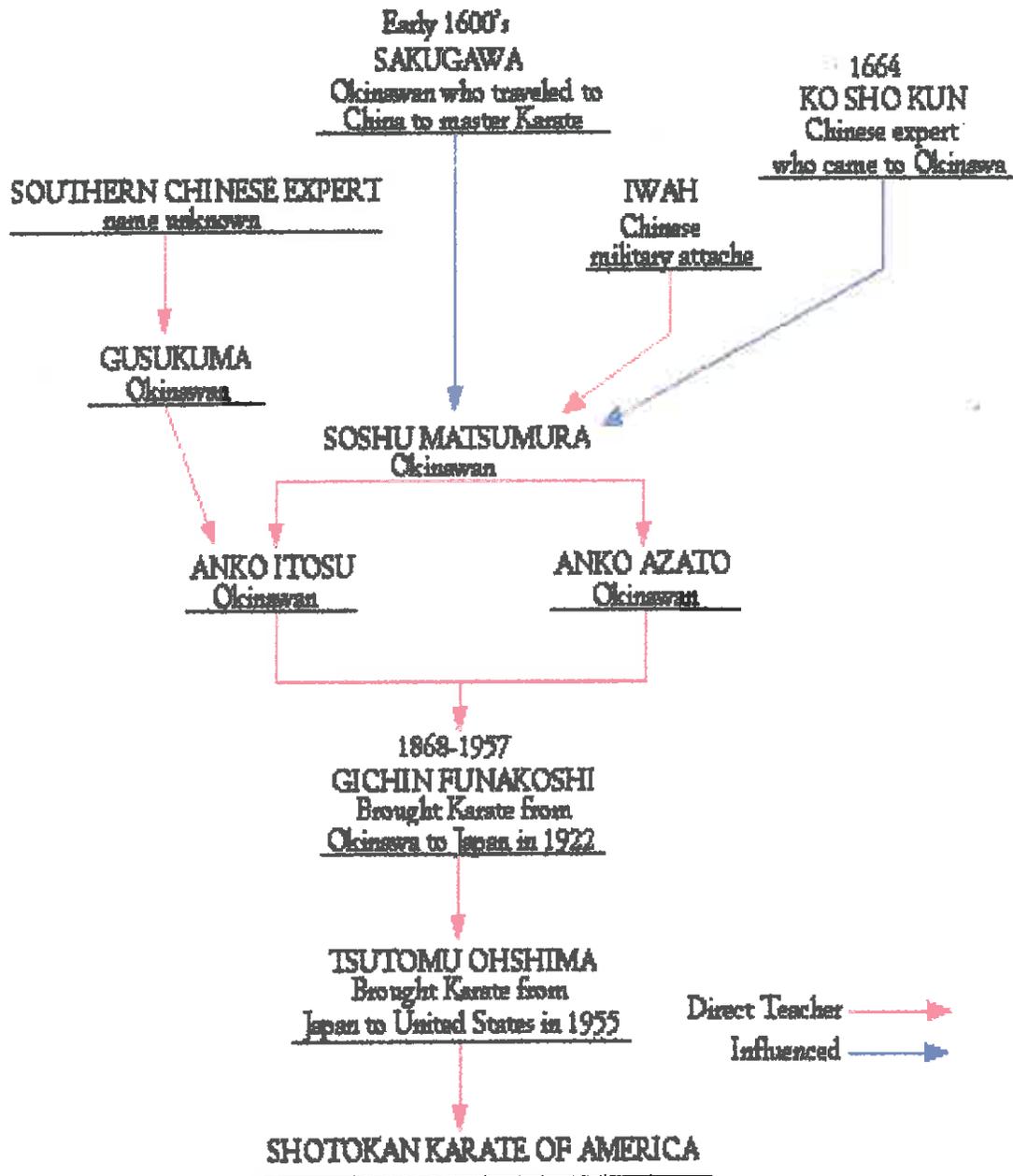
During the mid part of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) perhaps the first written acknowledgement of *chuan fa* is made by the Chinese general Ch'i Chi-Kuang in his book *Chi'hsiao-hsin-shu* ("New Text of Practical Tactics"). In this book which is primarily about battle maneuvers and weaponry Ch'i states in chapter fourteen, "It would seem that *chuan fa* does not have much use in war. But the practice of *chuan fa* makes ["activates"] your hands, feet, and body making them more flexible. It is the foundation of all martial arts".

As the times progressed a steady system of commerce developed between China, Japan, Okinawa, and Korea. The

travelers exchanged ideas as well as goods giving the To-de, or the “Chinese Hands” method of martial arts an opportunity to reach beyond the monastery walls. This knowledge had spread so effectively, in fact, that by 1609 as the Satsuma clan of Japan invaded and took control of Okinawa there were enough proponents of To-de in Okinawa to be perceived as a threat by the Satsuma. In response to this threat the Satsuma outlawed this practice of self defense causing the early style of karate to become an underground discipline once again. During this movement underground To-de became Okinawan in character and was split into three distinct groups: Naha-te, the forerunner of Goju-ryu; Tomari-te; Shuri-te, the precursor to Shobayashi-ryu, Kobayashi-ryu, Matsubayashi-ryu, Matsumura Orthodox, and also to the Japanese Shotokan.

Even 200 years later the Chinese Hands style of martial arts remained an outlawed activity in the isles of Okinawa. So in 1868 when a sickly child named Gichin Funakoshi was born in Shuri, Okinawa the study of the way of the open – hand was still in the hands of a secretive handful of followers, thus making the path of Gichin Funakoshi to become the father of modern-day karate-do that much more fascinating.

A SIMPLE TIMELINE OF SHOTOKAN



Gichin Funakoshi and the Development of Shotokan

Gichin Funakoshi is noted as being the founder of the Shotokan style of karate, but is perhaps most admired for his bringing karate out from the underground of Okinawa to a position of great status in mainland Japan. His belief in the karate-do way of life inspired him to make karate accessible to all people, and therefore Funakoshi can also be given much of the credit for helping karate cross the oceans and spread into other countries.

As a teen Gichin Funakoshi was of poor health and had a troubled home life. As a result he was sent to live with his grandparents and to begin primary school. The father of one of his friends at school was Yazutsune Azato, a renowned karate master who had gained prominence as a military chief for the king of the Ryukyu Islands. Azato felt that the physical disciplines of karate would help the sickly boy and began to have Funakoshi train with him secretly at night. Azato was also joined by his close friend Yasutsune Itosu in instructing Funakoshi in Shuri-te, Chinese classical literature, and classical poetry. The founder of Shuri-te Sokon Matsumura was Itosu's master and was also on the impressive list of instructors for Funakoshi.

Through his diligent studies Gichin Funakoshi became physically strong and developed a much disciplined mindset which evolved into his basic beliefs of karate-do as a total way of life. Being a well-educated young man of the Meiji period of Okinawan history Funakoshi was also aware of the many cultural changes of that time and so became more accepting of change in limited amounts. He grew to believe that the way to preserve many traditions could be to create adaptations to the basic tenants of traditions so that they could still exist among an ever-changing society.

In 1888 Gichin Funakoshi chose to become a teacher. So that one would be accepted by the new order for a position it was required of the men of that time to cut off their top-knot, a hairstyle which had long been worn as a symbol of manhood by the traditional Okinawan. Even though this tradition was important to Funakoshi who, indeed, had earlier refused to cut the top-knot off to gain admission to medical school he chose to

adapt this time around. His family disapproved of this action, but Funakoshi felt that the traditional hairstyle was not worth preserving in light of the good he could do as a teacher.

In 1902 the government lifted the ban on karate and sanctioned it as a legal martial art. The school teacher Gichin Funakoshi was finally able to reach out publicly and promote karate and began giving demonstrations throughout Okinawa. Then at the age of thirty-three Funakoshi was given permission from his masters Yazutsune Azato and Yazutsune Itosu to officially become a karate instructor.

Funakoshi was an extremely humble man. He was someone who felt that by devoting ones' life to a moral path, a path which could be found through the mental and physical disciplines of karate, a person could achieve their true potential. The karate master Gichin Funakoshi set out to set this example by devoting his life to the teaching of karate, working only other jobs in the off hours so that he and his family could survive. This way of thinking and teaching earned Funakoshi and excellent reputation in Okinawa. He became the chairman of Shobukai, the martial arts association of Okinawa, and there-by became known as a great expert past the borders of his home and into mainland Japan. In 1922 the Japanese invited Funakoshi to participate in the first "All Japan Athletic Exhibition of Ochanomizu" to be held in Tokyo. At the age of fifty-one Gichin Funakoshi left the island of Okinawa and was to never live there again.

The Japanese Education Ministry was extremely impressed by karate, and by Master Funakoshi's devotion to it as a way of life. The Ministry insisted that Funakoshi stay in Japan and teach karate in the school system. Funakoshi saw the opportunity to reach more people and to make karate more accessible to the general population and agreed to remain. Over the next thirty years Funakoshi would devote all his energies into taking the ancient martial art of karate and turning it into an art, despite ruffling some feathers along the way.

In 1922 Funakoshi wrote "Ryuku Kempo: Karate" his first of three books on karate, and the first work ever to be published on karate. In this book were Funakoshi's first steps at defining a unique style of karate by using the "empty hands" character of the Japanese exclusively, leaving behind the old-style character "Chinese Hands" to the past. Funakoshi began giving the karate doctrine some standardization by using only Japanese spelling of

words and reworking certain movements so that more people would have the ability to perform them.

Although these changes were not necessarily sanctioned by all the old masters, they certainly helped karate to become more “Japanese” allowing Funakoshi’s style to gain acceptance and popularity in mainland Japan. Also helping to increase recognition of Funakoshi’s karate as a unique style was the tiger symbol which had been used on the cover of his first book. The artist Hoan Kosugi was one of Funakoshi’s major supporters of his karate and of his talent as an author and a poet. Kosugi urged Funakoshi to write the first book and in so doing so agreed to illustrate Funakoshi’s writing. Since “*tora no maki*” is the Japanese term for an official written document of art, and “*tora*” also means “tiger” Kosugi decided that the cover artwork should be a tiger (a sort of play on words).

Probably the element of Gichin Funakoshi’s karate which stood out amongst all others was Funakoshi’s insistence on not allowing *kumite* (freeform fighting) in his classes. Funakoshi saw sports sparring as beneath the dignity of the “art” of karate and against his belief that “empty hand” meant not only no weapons, but also meant the emptying of one’s heart of earthly conceits such as competition. His devout adherence to his belief in karate as an austere guide to earthly life brought to him many believers, and probably caused the creation of other styles of karate when many of his converts felt that *kumite* needed to be added to this way of life in order to increase their awareness of the skills of self defense.

The year 1935 saw Funakoshi’s long-time devotion to his karate come to fruition in the form of the first free-standing karate dojo, *Shoto-kan*. “*Shoto*” was Funakoshi’s pen name under which he wrote his poetry and meant “pine waves”, for to Funakoshi poetry was as the wind through the pines. And the term “*kan*” means “house of”, so Gichin Funakoshi named his dojo “*Shoto – kan*, and his karate, his life, became Shotokan. He was seventy years old, and was yet to stop influencing people’s lives through karate because there was another major cultural shift about to occur in Funakoshi’s lifetime. World War II was about to begin.

As World War II ravaged the world in general and on Japan and Okinawa particularly during the 1940’s all that was tradition seemed to be disappearing in Funakoshi’s world. In 1945 his *Shoto-kan* fell to Allied bombs and Funakoshi left Tokyo to be

with his wife in the camps of Kyushu where the people of Shuri had fled during the destruction of Okinawa. In that same year he lost his third son and heir to Shoto-kan, Gigo, to tuberculosis. Two years later his wife died and Gichin Funakoshi once again set out for Tokyo his faith in his way of life intact despite the personal tragedies that had come to him.

Just as General Ch'i had viewed karate in the 17th century as an excellent form of "physical education" but not as an effective method of aggression, so did the post-war government in Japan. This attitude was a fortunate turn of events for the future development of karate. Due to the fact that Funakoshi's dojo had been under the Ministry of Education in Japan and not a part of the War Ministry Funakoshi was allowed to rebuild the Shoto-kan. Once again Funakoshi found himself as fulfilling a destiny by offering every person an effective, stable order to their lives, and he felt as most other masters of his era that post-war Japan was deeply in need of the moral cleansing that karate-do could supply.

Masters of other forms of martial arts came to the Shotokan teachers to study and to take advantage of the only form of martial arts tradition still available to them during this time. Also developing an interest in karate were the American servicemen stationed in Japan. So intrigued by this method of "physical fitness" they wrote home expounding its virtues and between the years 1949-1951 Gichin Funakoshi became flooded with requests to send teachers to American airbases.

During 1955 Funakoshi, over eighty years old by now, organized the Japan Karate Association, and sent one of his top instructors Tsutomu Oshima to the United States. Oshima took with him to Los Angeles not only the stringent precepts of Shotokan which he had learned from Gichin Funakoshi himself, but also a deep personal interpretation of Funakoshi's Shotokan. In Tsutomu Oshima's own words: "Master Funakoshi wasn't one to give metaphysical explanations for everything. He was very practical and was influenced by the teachings of Confucius who never talked about great mysteries or spiritual issues. Funakoshi, like Confucius, was more interested in the realistic world of people, ideas and events."

As is shown by Oshima's words Funakoshi's Shotokan had evolved from a basic form of self defense developed by Chinese peasants and monks in need of methods of protection not requiring weaponry, into a way of living one's life without the

Funakoshi's disciplines were very strict and could be tedious they could also allow for practical adaptations in order that Shotokan become a part of the world of those wishing to live the Shotokan way.



Gichin Funakoshi
1868-1957

The Twenty Precepts of Gichin Funakoshi

1. Karate begins with courtesy and ends with courtesy.
2. There is no first attack in karate.
3. Karate is an aid to justice.
4. First control yourself before attempting to control others.
5. Spirit first, technique second.
6. Always be ready to release your mind.
7. Accidents arise from negligence.
8. Do not think that karate training is only in the dojo.
9. It will take your entire life to learn karate, there is no limit.
10. Put your everyday living into karate and you will find "Myo" (subtle secrets).
11. Karate is like boiling water, if you do not heat it constantly it will cool.
12. Do not think that you have to win, think rather that you do not have to lose.
13. Victory depends on your ability to distinguish vulnerable points from invulnerable ones.
14. The battle is according to how you move guarded and unguarded (move according to your opponent).
15. Think of your hands and feet as swords.
16. When you leave home, think that you have numerous opponents waiting for you. It is your behavior that invites trouble from them.
17. Beginners must master low stance and posture, natural body positions are for the advanced.
18. Practicing a kata is one thing, engaging in a real fight is another.
19. Do not forget to correctly apply: strength and weakness of power, stretching and contraction of the body and slowness and speed of techniques.
20. Always think and devise ways to live the precepts every day.

Master Funakoshi's Six Rules of Karate

1. You must be deadly serious in training.
2. Train with both heart and soul without worrying about theory.
3. (This rule is missing. Perhaps it was lost or mixed into another rule in translation. Maybe Funakoshi did not want to share this rule with other cultures. Whatever the reason, it was not included.)
4. Avoid self-deceit and dogmatism
5. Try to see yourself as you truly are and try to adapt what is meritorious in the work of others.
6. Abide by the rules of ethics in your daily life whether in public or private.

Funakoshi's Five Dojo Kuns

1. Seek Perfection of Character (Character)
2. Be Faithful (Loyalty)
3. Endeavor (Effort)
4. Respect Others (Etiquette)
5. Refrain From Violent Behavior (Control)

The Shotokan Heritage

Funakoshi's style of karate focused almost entirely on *kata* (form). He established a doctrine of nineteen kata, with three being the basis for a beginner's curriculum. He made changes himself to the older kata of Chinese origin because he felt karate to be a Japanese martial art and saw many of the older Chinese ways and spellings to be a roadblock for many of the Japanese students. It was the changing of certain spellings which would cause many of the Okinawan masters, such as Shoshin Nagamine, to disagree with Gichin Funakoshi.

Funakoshi felt that each level must be mastered entirely before advancing to the next, even if this meant taking years to master only one kata. He realized that every student was different and recommended that the kata could best be mastered by dividing it into several sessions so that a student could more easily monitor the areas upon which the most work was required. According to Master Funakoshi only once a student had completely mastered the kata would it be worth the student's time to attempt kumite. Gichin Funakoshi made no wasted movements in his kata, using a technique of speed combined with short bursts of strength only when needed.

Funakoshi viewed the fist to be the heart of karate and felt that unless the fist was trained constantly all other movements in kata and kumite would amount to no more than dance steps. He felt that all parts of the body should be toughened as much as was possible and was known to beat himself with an oak staff to drive this point home to his students. The makiwara, according to Funakoshi, played a key part in strengthening hands and feet and turning them into effective weapons. It is known that even in his 50's and 60's Funakoshi remained extremely strong and agile and his students found his defenses very difficult to penetrate.

However, even after all is said and done about Funakoshi's beliefs in the place of kata, kumite, makiwara and mind-set in Shotokan karate perhaps one the most telling legacies that can be viewed in Shotokan today would be the style's ability to adapt. In fact it could even be pointed out that the Shotokan heritage to all styles of karate would be the way that Funakoshi showed the world that making changes in karate would not necessarily cause the corruption and demise of the art, but

instead allow it to live on. This viewpoint is especially valid when we look at the migration of Karate to the United States.

Despite the enthusiasm with which karate was greeted, it was extremely difficult for a dojo to become a thriving part of American culture. The following excerpt from a magazine interview given by the Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu master Eihachi Ota helps us to understand these difficulties:

“It was difficult teaching karate to Americans at this time so a lot of instructors modified the training to make it easier and less demanding. They had rent to pay and if you trained the students hard as we had been trained back home, they left and went to an “easier” dojo. Students wanted to learn quickly and easily which is not really possible in the case of karate. As a result there was a conflict of interests between the instructors, who knew the students had to work hard to improve, and the students who wanted to improve but didn’t understand that they had to work really hard to do so.”

Shotokan and all styles of karate spread rapidly throughout the U.S., although much of what was being studied would not have been considered to be true karate by those such as Gichin Funakoshi. And yet the true spirit of the Shotokan way was able to take root and flourish in the United States, it simply took some time. In today’s world well over fifty different Shotokan federations can be found. Perhaps not even one of them puts forth the teachings of Funakoshi to be followed to the letter, yet one can take a page from his second book and observe that the kata are still practiced the same manner and it can be seen by researching the various Shotokan websites on the internet that Funakoshi’s precepts and dojo rules remain a point upon which all the various Shotokan associations focus. We can see that the way of Shotokan is still being passed on “straight and well”.

Masters of Other Styles Who Trained Under Funakoshi

Ohtsuka Hironori* (Wado-ryu)

Tamio Takemri (Seikukan)

Sasaki Takashi (Chidokan)

Yamada Tatsuo (Nippon Kempo)

Konishi Yashuhiro (Shindojinen-Ryu)

Mas Oyama (Kyokushinkai)

Koide Masaycki (Renbu kai)

*Ohtsuka Hironori was the first Japanese person to receive a shodan from Gichin Funakoshi

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