

Origin of Shotokan Karate

Shotokan translates literally into “the hall of Shoto”. Shoto was the pen name of Gichin Funakoshi, the karate master responsible for popularizing karate in Japan. This “hall” was the world’s first free standing karate dojo built for Funakoshi by his students in 1936.

In 1868, Gichin Funakoshi was born in Okinawa into a privileged class known as the shizoku. Okinawa is the largest island in a chain of more than 60 small islands found south of the mainland of Japan. Funakoshi was a premature baby which was an omen of ill health in Okinawa at that time. As was customary with children born prematurely, he was raised by his maternal grandmother who could provide him with the additional nurturing he required.

Funakoshi’s doctor recommended that he train with the karate master Azato in the hopes that it would improve the child’s health. Azato accepted the young pupil and Funakoshi began the physical regimen which he later came to believe blessed him with good health for all of his 89 years.

Azato advocated strict physical and mental discipline for all of his students; he believed that both were necessary for proper growth and development. Azato encouraged Funakoshi’s studies of the Chinese Classics and the Confucian Dialects that were required of a son of the shizoku class.

In 1888, Funakoshi passed the necessary tests qualifying him as an education teacher. He commenced a 30 year teaching career in Okinawa’s primary, middle, and upper level schools. Throughout this period Funakoshi continued his karate training daily, making a nightly pilgrimage to the home of Azato.

An Art of Necessity

As a result of a weapons ban enacted 400 years earlier, karate was an illegal pursuit in Okinawa at the time when Funakoshi was training. This ban prompted the Okinawans, a peaceful farming people, to develop a martial art utilizing their bare hands and farming implements as weapons. The Okinawans toughened their fists on boards and focused on hardening their body to guard against blows. These origins patterned Shotokan Karate into the practical and effective style which it has become.

Karate Surfaces

Once karate training emerged from the underground, various styles and training methods were traded and formalized. Through his tutelage under Azato and his travels throughout Okinawa, Funakoshi was able to meet and train under numerous Okinawan masters. Funakoshi incorporated the best of these teachers and consolidated into one style, Shotokan. Funakoshi was integral to

the organization and propagation of karate; he was highly educated, articulate, and dedicated to the promotion of karate for health purposes and character development.

In 1902 Funakoshi performed the first recorded karate demonstration for the commissioner of schools for Kogashima Prefecture. The demonstration was so successful that karate was approved as an education program. Interest in karate grew quickly and, between 1914 and 1915, Funakoshi toured with a demonstration team which he had organized. At the request of the Ministry of Education, he traveled to Japan to give a demonstration.

Turning Japanese

In 1921 the Crown Prince of Japan visited Okinawa and witnessed one of Funakoshi's demonstrations. The Crown Prince was fascinated and invited Funakoshi to perform at the first National Athletic Exhibition, held in Japan in 1922. This event was attended by many of the Japanese upper class and, after the demonstration, members of the Japanese Royal Family requested that Funakoshi stay in Japan to stage more demonstrations.

The founder of judo, Jigoro Kano, requested Funakoshi instruct him in karate basics and encouraged him to stay in Japan and foster his art. Within a short period of time, Funakoshi was appointed to instruct the military academy, Tokyo Bar Association, the Society for Researching High School Physical Education, and the Tabata Poplar Club. Within one year karate has become very popular with the elite and Funakoshi established his first club in a dormitory for newly arrived Okinawan students in Tokyo. He cleaned the dormitory during the day to support himself.

In 1922 Funakoshi published his first book on karate, Ryukyu Kempo Karate and in 1924 he established the first collegiate karate club. Other collegiate clubs would follow shortly and, by 1940, 30% of Japan's colleges and universities had established karate clubs. Clubs were also established in major Japanese companies like the Tokyo Department Store and the Railroad Company.

JKA

In 1949, Funakoshi's students organized themselves into the Nihon Karate Kyokai (Japan Karate Association or JKA). Most of the JKA's members were university alumni. Even from inception, there was a certain amount of tension within the JKA between the top four university clubs in Japan: Keio, Waseda, Hosei, and Takudai. Takudai was the only one of these four university clubs that was not associated with wealth and position. Takudai was established before World War II to train overseas administrators; Takudai students studied international trade, import/export, and economics.

In 1955, the more conservative and wealthy members of the JKA were appalled to learn that the instructors at Takudai were being paid to teach karate, and worse yet, that they were planning to market karate internationally. They believed that this spoiled the traditional teacher/student relationship and caused many conservative members to leave the JKA. This freed the instructors at Takudai to concentrate on internationalizing the art.

The instructors at Takudai believed that the best way to popularize the art of Karate was to develop it into a competitive sport with rules similar to those developed by Jigoro Kano for Judo. The 1st All Japan Karate-Do Tournament was held in June of 1957. The JKA also implemented a strict training program to produce instructors who could be trusted to spread karate overseas; only the most proficient karate instructors (2nd dan) who had graduated with honors from college were admitted to the program. In one year of intensive study they pursued not only karate, but studies in psychology, physics, anatomy, business management, history, and philosophy. They completed the program with a 3rd dan, and then were assigned to a one year internship.

Karate Comes to America

Meanwhile, the groundwork had been laid to introduce karate to America. In 1948, the U.S. Air Force arranged for martial arts to be performed at their bases in Japan. In 1951, an eight week training program including judo, karate, aikido, and taiho-jutsu was implemented by the U.S. Strategic Air Command to condition American airmen in Japan. This program was so successful that it continued for fifteen years. In 1953 the program was extended to all American bases in Japan.

Shotokan Karate Today

Shotokan karate has changed and matured throughout its history. This follows Gichin Funakoshi's belief that the art could, and always should, be improved upon. Today Shotokan karate emphasizes balance and muscle control. Shotokan generally has fewer techniques than other styles, but each technique has been proven effective if trained consistently. Shotokan fighters are distinguished by their strong, low stances and linear attacks driven by powerful hip movements. Funakoshi believed that proper study of karate fostered humbleness and excellence; he fervently believed in the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of karate.

In April of 1957, Gichin Funakoshi died in Japan. He had successfully launched the program which would introduce the art of karate to the world. Currently, Shotokan karate is practiced by over 6 million people in almost every country in the world.