

# Master Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of modern karate-do. (1868-1957)

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If there is one man who could be credited with popularizing karate, it is Gichin Funakoshi. Funakoshi was born in 1868 in Shuri, then the capital city of the island of Okinawa. He started practicing karate while in primary school but didn't begin his mission of spreading it to the outside world until he was 53.

Funakoshi was born into a well-to-do family of scholars in Shuri, Okinawa, in 1868. His grandfather had been a tutor for the daughters of the village governor, and had been given a small estate and "privileged family" status in return. Gichin's father, however, was a heavy drinker, and squandered most of the family's wealth, so young Funakoshi grew up in a home that could provide very few luxuries.

As a teenager, Funakoshi was sickly and weak. Fortunately, when he finally started primary school, he happened to be in the same class as the son of Yasutsune Azato, a renowned karate master who had served as a military chief for the king of the Ryukyu Islands. Azato took Funakoshi on as his only student, teaching him late at night because of laws which forbid the teaching or practicing of karate.

It was from Azato and Azato's close friend Yasutsune Itosu that Funakoshi learned most of his martial arts. From childhood until he left for Tokyo in 1921, Funakoshi studied diligently from these two masters, learning not only shuri-te karate, but Chinese classical literature and poetry. He also spent a short time studying under Itosu's master, shuri-te founder Sokon Matsumura.

Funakoshi took a job as an assistant schoolteacher in 1888 at the age of 21, and also took a wife about the same time. He supported his wife, his parents and his grandparents on a salary of about three dollars a month. His wife, also karate adept, encouraged Funakoshi to continue practicing. In addition, she took a job working in the fields during the day and then wove fabrics at night to help make ends meet.

In 1901, karate practice was legalized in Okinawa, and its study became mandatory in middle schools. Securing permission from Azato and Itosu, Funakoshi announced that he would begin formally teaching karate. He was 33 years old.

There are many stories about Funakoshi's exploits as a youth. One thing is certain: he found more honor in avoiding a fight than in starting one, and he believed there was more courage in fleeing a confrontation than in defeating an enemy. He claimed to have only used his karate against another person one time, during World War II. A thief tried to attack him, but Funakoshi stepped out of the way and grabbed the man's testicles. He held the man in that position until a constable passed by. Although Funakoshi had not started the altercation, he later revealed that he always felt shame about that day because he had not avoided the confrontation.

It was that "true spirit of karate" that Funakoshi spent his entire life trying to achieve. Mas Oyama, who later created kyoku shinkai karate, once trained under Funakoshi, but quit because Funakoshi's karate was "too slow" and seemed more like a lesson in etiquette and discipline. But this was how Funakoshi wanted it. He taught that karate

should not be used for self-defence-even as a last resort-because once karate was used, the conflict became a matter of life or death, and somebody was going to get injured. Funakoshi always remembered the proverb Soke Matsumura taught him: "When two tigers fight, one is bound to be hurt. The other will be dead."

Funakoshi became so skilful at karate that he was chosen to teach it to the reigning King of Okinawa. Before Funakoshi left the island, he had already risen to the position of chairman of Shobukai, the martial arts association of Okinawa.

In May 1922, the Japan Education Ministry organized the first All Japan Athletic Exhibition of Ochanomizu in Tokyo. Wanting the event to be as comprehensive as possible, the ministry decided to include karate. As the province's leading practitioner, Funakoshi was the obvious choice. The Japanese budomen, tremendously impressed by karate, immediately set out to persuade Funakoshi to stay and teach the dynamic martial art to Japanese youth. He accepted the project with vigour, because he harboured a secret desire to see karate proliferate as kendo and judo had.

The arrival of Gichin Funakoshi was inauspicious, to say the least, and no one seriously expected anything to come of his visit to Japan. At 51, the mild-mannered high school teacher from Naha was already well past his prime. But how were they to know that Gichin Funakoshi was destined to become the Father of Japanese Karate and would set in motion the forces of a little-known martial art which would one day sweep the world?

Funakoshi karate was well received by the Japanese, and judo founder Jigoro Kano asked for private lessons on basic karate kata (forms). Funakoshi taught Kano for several months and then arranged to return to Okinawa. Before he could leave, however, Hoan Kosugi, a popular artist of that time, asked Funakoshi to teach both him and his fellow artists karate, because there was no one else in the area who could. It was then Funakoshi realized that, if he were to spread karate throughout Japan, Tokyo was the place to do it.

Judo founder Jigoro Kano was so impressed with Gichin Funakoshi's karate that he asked for, and received, private karate lessons from Funakoshi for several months.

Taking up residence at a dormitory for Okinawan students at Keio University, Funakoshi began teaching karate in the dorm's lecture hall.

Funakoshi became a subject of some controversy only a few years after relocating to Tokyo. For centuries, karate had been written two different ways in Japanese. One way used the characters for "Chinese hands," and the other used the characters for "empty hands." Although both were pronounced "karate," they were written differently. Funakoshi agreed with the obvious historical allusion in the "Chinese hands" characters, but he felt that the use of "empty hands" not only emphasized the art of self-defense without weapons, but also characterized the sense of emptying one's heart and mind of earthly desires and vanity. When he wrote his first book, *Ryukyu Kempo: Karate*, in 1922, he used the "empty hands" characters exclusively.

Funakoshi is credited with standardizing the writing of karate, a feat which, though angering several martial arts masters at the time, met with eventual universal approval.

In 1923, a massive earthquake shook Japan, and Tokyo was razed in the ensuing fire. Although the dormitory Funakoshi called home and still taught out of was spared, many of

his students died or disappeared. For a short time he suspended his instruction and spent the next several months assisting in the massive cleanup.

Funakoshi's next major task was the creation of an all-new dojo (training hall). Because he had a difficult time raising funds, the building was not started until 1935. A year later, the world's first freestanding karate dojo was completed. Funakoshi named the school "shotokan" (the house of Shoto) after the pen name he used when writing poetry. When he stepped through the doors for the first time, he was almost 70 years old.

As he became increasingly busy with his dojo, Funakoshi began handing over his teaching assignments at the various universities to his students. He still conducted demonstrations, however, including regular performances before Emperor Hirohito, who invited him to the Imperial Palace on an annual basis.

The United States declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941, and times grew hard in Japan. Funakoshi's third son, Gigo, who was supposed to inherit his father's school, died of tuberculosis in 1945. A few months later, Funakoshi's dojo was destroyed by Allied bombers. In that same year, the battle for Okinawa began in earnest, and many people fled to the island of Kyushu, including Funakoshi's wife, who had remained in Shuri during his residence in Tokyo. The couple were reunited at a refugee camp on Kyushu, and Funakoshi stayed with his wife until her death in 1947. He then boarded a train for Tokyo to start all over again.

More than just the buildings had been demolished in Japan during the war; national spirit had been eroded as well. The occupying forces disallowed martial arts instruction. Fortunately, because of Funakoshi's association with the Ministry of Education, karate was classified as physical education, not a martial art. He therefore began teaching again, and within a few years was drawing martial artists from other disciplines, all of whom were longing for a place to practice. Included among these new recruits were American servicemen, who were amazed at this form of exercise. For every GI who returned to the United States with a karate tale, Funakoshi received two more letters from Americans who wished to become students.

Funakoshi, approaching his mid-80s, found a new task. He had spread karate throughout Japan, now it was time to spread it throughout the world. In 1953, after several requests from Americans for qualified karate instructors, he began sending some of his finest students to the United States to begin teaching martial arts. These men, who included Masatoshi Nakayama, Hidetaka Nishiyama and Tsutomu Ohshima, were America's karate pioneers. Funakoshi eventually organized his students and their schools into the Japan Karate Association in 1955, one of the first international martial arts associations.

Two years later, at age 89, Funakoshi died in his sleep, leaving behind a legacy so huge that its shadow stretched from the shores of tiny Okinawa across the Pacific Ocean to the United States. Funakoshi took little credit for karate's immense popularity, but few denied that he had almost single-handedly brought the art to Japan and subsequently sent it overseas.

### Funakoshi's Teachings

Funakoshi concentrated almost entirely on teaching kata. He brought 15 kata compiled from various styles, and developed some himself. Although he taught a little kumite, his approach to karate was based on the following precept: "Once you have completely

mastered kata, then you can adapt it to kumite." The closest thing to karate in Japan when Funakoshi arrived was the atemi (technique of striking the vital parts of the body).

Funakoshi also stressed the importance of toughening each part of the body until it was as hard as iron. He constantly beat himself with an oak staff to drive home his point to his students! A makiwara (straw-padded pole) was used to toughen the hands and feet.

Even in his 50s and 60s Funakoshi was agile and unusually strong, especially in defense. Funakoshi's defense was very difficult to penetrate during training, no matter how hard his students tried.

Perhaps the most important work Funakoshi accomplished was during the 30's when he systematized karate kata and techniques, incorporating a code of ethics and discipline found in the other Japanese martial arts. This codification forged the bonds that would one day transform karate into a mental and physical discipline which would rival judo in "finding the way." He published three books on the subject-the second and the most important one of which, Karate-Do Instructions, was published in 1939. Aided by his son Yoshitaka, Funakoshi continued teaching karate throughout the rest of the decade at the Mejiro dojo as well as at the college clubs he had organized. When the war broke out, the number of students gradually decreased because of the draft.

Most of Funakoshi's former students remember him as a mild, gentle and friendly person. The Okinawan master always shook hands and put his arm around them when they met. He wasn't bossy, but when he was teaching karate, he was very strict.

He didn't drink, smoke, gamble or play around with women. He was the kind of man who never made enemies. Outside of karate, his two main interests were calligraphy and composing Chinese poems. He was convinced that living a good, clean life created a character best suited for the study of karate. He educated his students by trying to get them to fulfil their own potential.

Before he brought karate to Japan from Okinawa, it was just a local system in Okinawa. Upon bringing karate to Japan and seeing Japan's traditional martial arts, such as judo and kendo, Master Funakoshi patterned karate after these arts to a large degree and made karate popular. He had the technical and philosophical ability to do this and got people to accept his ideas about karate rather easily. This was one of his biggest contributions to the martial arts. That's why it is often said that Master Funakoshi was a great philosopher and a great technician. On karate's spiritual side, too many people look on the surface of karate and only see violent techniques: kicking, punching and striking. They see karate as something that's only very dangerous. But Master Funakoshi combined karate techniques with traditional budo (the martial way) to put the essence of budo into karate-a real way of the martial arts. That's why Master Funakoshi's students did not have any violent ideas. He taught that karate is defensive, never offensive. When Master Funakoshi studied in Okinawa, you couldn't publicly practice karate. It wasn't for everybody and was secret. Karate practitioners were like a secret society. But Master Funakoshi opened karate to the public and proved that its techniques are effective. And yet, Master Funakoshi not only stressed the technical aspects of karate, he emphasized that karate has a philosophical background. To him, karate had a philosophical essence that carried over into other parts of students' lives. In other words, karate was a way of life: karate-do. Otherwise, you only have karate-jutsu, which is just the art of fighting. Master Funakoshi made this distinction.

When you first met him, he looked very old. Nobody would guess that he was a real grandmaster. That's how humble he was. He always felt he needed more study, and was a great example of a genuine martial artist. Some masters, once they reach a certain point, like to show off. "I'm a fifth-degree black belt; I'm the strongest man in the world," they spout. Such behavior had nothing to do with Master Funakoshi's philosophy. He felt no need to show off. Once he put on a gi (karate uniform), however, and went into the dojo, he was different- right away. He still didn't show off, but he changed. When he stood in the dojo, he looked as though one of his movements could destroy anything. That's how good his techniques were. Then, when he finished training, he again became very humble. Master Funakoshi always said that the martial artist's etiquette was very important, and that etiquette was the sign of the true martial artist. That's why Master Funakoshi didn't look like a so-called "real" grand- master. He didn't show that kind of thing except in the dojo.

Master Funakoshi was very wise and had a broad mind. He felt that karate should be open to everybody; he wanted everybody to know the art. If you have some nice medicine, he felt you should share it with everybody. That's why he agreed to form an association, and that's why he created the JKA. He never said anything about any one particular style. For instance, some had goju style, while others had wado style. But he never taught the need for styles.

Funakoshi always believed kata was the secret to becoming skilled in karate. He made students practice the pinan and naihanchi forms for at least three years before he allowed them to progress to the more advanced kata. The repetitious training paid off, though, because his students developed the most precise, exact karate taught anywhere.

Funakoshi was a man of Tao. He placed no emphasis on competitions, record breaking or championships. Instead, he emphasized self-perfection. He believed in the common decency and respect that one human being owed another. He was the master of masters.

Some final words...

As karate legends go, Gichin Funakoshi's life was not terribly exciting. He never challenged anyone to a sword duel, never attempted to dismantle a bull's horn, never had a presumptuous nickname and, in fact, never left the islands of Japan. He was a poet, and a schoolteacher, and the closest he ever came to seeing battle was when he mediated a dispute between two neighboring villages.

Yet Funakoshi is one of the most honored, cherished and memorable martial artists in history. His innovations left indelible marks on the art form we know today as karate. Not only was shotokan karate, the style he founded, influenced by Funakoshi, but dozens of other styles as well.

Funakoshi died in 1957 at the age of 88, after humbly making a tremendous contribution to the art of karate

## Gichin Funakoshi

Gichin Funakoshi was born in Shuri, Okinawa in 1868. As a boy, he was trained by two famous masters of that time. Each trained him in a different Okinawan martial art. From Yasutsune Azato he learned Shuri-te. From Yasutsune Itosu, he learned Naha-te. It would be the melding of these two styles that would one day become Shotokan karate.

Funakoshi-sensei is the man who introduced karate to Japan. In 1917 he was asked to perform his martial art at a physical education exhibition sponsored by the Ministry of Education. He was asked back again in 1922 for another exhibition. He was asked back a third time, but this was a special performance. He demonstrated his art for the emperor and the royal family! After this, Funakoshi-sensei decided to remain in Japan and teach and promote his art.

Gichin Funakoshi passed away in 1957 at the age of 88. Aside from creating Shotokan karate and introducing it to Japan and the world, he also wrote the very book on the subject of karate, "Ryukyu Kempo: Karate-do". He also wrote "Karate-Do Kyohan" - The Master Text, the "handbook" of Shotokan and he wrote his autobiography, "Karate-Do: My Way of Life". These books and his art are a fitting legacy for this unassuming and gentle man.

IF THERE IS ONE MAN WHO COULD BE CREDITED with placing karate in the position it enjoys on the Japanese mainland today, it is Gichin Funakoshi. This meijin (master) was born in Shuri, Okinawa, and didn't even begin his second life as harbinger of official recognition for karate on the mainland until he was fifty-three years old.

Funakoshi's story is very similar to that of many greats in karate. He began as a weakling, sickly and in poor health, whose parents brought him to Itosu for his karate training. Between his doctor, Tokashiki, who prescribed certain herbs that would strengthen him, and Itosu's good instruction, Funakoshi soon blossomed. He became a good student, and with Asato, Arakaki and Matsumura as his other teachers, expertise and his highly disciplined mind.

When he finally came to Japan from Okinawa in 1922, he stayed among his own people at the prefectural students' dormitory at Suidobata, Tokyo. He lived in a small room alongside the entrance and would clean the dormitory during the day when the students were in their classes. At night, he would teach them karate.

After a short time, he had earned sufficient means to open his first school in Meishojuku. Following this, his shotokan in Mejiro was opened and he finally had a place from which he sent forth a variety of outstanding students, such as Takagi and Nakayama of Nippon Karate Kyokai, Yoshida of Takudai, Obata of Keio, Noguchi of Waseda, and Otsuka, the founder of Wado-Ryu karate. It is said that in his travels in and around Japan, while giving demonstrations and lectures, Funakoshi always had Otsuka accompany him.

The martial arts world in Japan, especially in the early Twenties and up to the early Forties, enjoyed ultra-nationalists were riding high, and they looked down their noses at any art that was not purely called it a pagan and savage art.

Funakoshi overcame this prejudice and finally gained formal recognition of karate as one of the Japanese martial arts by 1941.

Needless to say, many karate clubs flourished on mainland Japan. In 1926, karate was introduced in Tokyo University. Three years later, karate was formally organized on a club level by three students: Matsuda Katsuichi, Himotsu Kazumi and Nakachi K., Funakoshi was their teacher. He also organized karate clubs in Keio University and in the Shichi-Tokudo, a barracks situated in a corner of the palace grounds.

Funakoshi visited the Shichi-Tokudo every other day to teach and was always accompanied by Otsuka, reputed to be one of the most brilliant of his students in Japan proper.

Otsuka's favorite kata was the Naihanchi, which he performed before the royalty of Japan with another outstanding student named Oshima, who performed the Pinan kata (Heian).

One day, when Otsuka was teaching at the Shichi-Tokudo, a student, Kogura, from Keio University who had a san-dan degree (3rd-degree black belt) in kendo (Japanese fencing) and also a black belt in karate, took a sword and faced Otsuka. All the other students watched to see what would happen. They felt that no one could face the shinken (open blade) held by a kendo expert.

Otsuka calmly watched Kogura and the moment he made a move with his sword, Otsuka swept him off his feet. As this was unrehearsed, it attested to the skill of Otsuka. It also bore out Funakoshi's philosophy that kata practice was more than sufficient in times of need.

In 1927, three men, Miki, Bo and Hirayama decided that kata practice was not enough and tried to introduce jiyukumite (free-fighting). They devised protective clothing and used kendo masks in their matches in order to utilize full contact. Funakoshi heard about these bouts and, when he could not discourage such attempts at what he considered belittling to the art of karate, he stopped coming to the Shichi-Tokudo. Both Funakoshi and his top student, Otsuka, never showed their faces there again.

When Funakoshi came to mainland Japan, he brought 16 kata with him: 5 pinan, 3 naihanchi, kushanku dai, kushanku sho, seisan, patsai, wanshu, chinto, jutte and jion. He kept his students on the basics before they progressed to the more advanced forms. The repetitious training that he instituted paid dividends; his students went on to produce the most precise, exact type of karate taught anywhere.

Jigoro Kano, the founder of modern judo, once invited Funakoshi and a friend, Makoto Gima, to perform at the Kodokan (then located at Tomisaka). Approximately a hundred people watched the performance. Gima, who had studied under Yabu Kentsu as a youth in Okinawa, performed the naihanshi shodan, and Funakoshi performed the koshokun (kushanku dai).

Kanso sensei watched the performance and asked Funakoshi about the techniques involved. He was greatly impressed. He invited Funakoshi and Gima to a tendon (fish and rice) dinner, during which he sang and made jokes to put Funakoshi at ease.

Irrespective of his sincerity in teaching the art of true karate, Funakoshi was not without his detractors. His critics scorned his insistence on the kata and derided what they called "soft" karate that wasted too much time. Funakoshi insisted on hito-kata sanen (three years on one kata).

Funakoshi was a humble man. He preached and practiced an essential humility. He did not preach the way that is rooted in the true perspective of things, full of life and awareness. He lived at peace with himself and with his fellow men.

Whenever the name of Gichin Funakoshi is mentioned, it brings to mind the parable of "A Man of Tao (Do) and a Little Man". As it is told, a student once asked, "What is the difference between a man of Tao and a little man?" The sensei replies, "It is simple. When the little man receives his first dan (degree or rank), he can hardly wait to run home and shout at the top of his voice to tell everyone that he made his first dan. Upon receiving his second dan, he will climb to the rooftops and shout to the people. Upon receiving his third

dan, he will jump in his automobile and parade through town with horns blowing, telling one and all about his third dan".

The sensei continues, "When the man of Tao receives his first dan, he will bow his head in gratitude. Upon receiving his second dan, he will bow his head and his shoulders. Upon receiving his third dan, he will bow to the waist and quietly walk alongside the wall so that people will not see him or notice him".

Funakoshi was a man of Tao. He placed no emphasis on competitions, record breaking or championships. He placed emphasis on individual self-perfection. He believed in the common decency and respect that one human being owed to another. He was the master of masters.