

Gichin Funakoshi

The great karate master Gichin Funakoshi was a key pioneer in the development of modern karate. In fact, he was the "prime mover" in bringing traditional Okinawan karate to Japan. He himself was caught in the great wave of social change sweeping through Japan and its prefectures. His contributions include authoring several of the first publications describing the previously secret art of karate, strengthening the connection between character development and karate training, and the development of modern teaching methods. Master Funakoshi supported the realization that karate would evolve from a provincial fighting system to a prominent member of the modern Japanese martial arts.

The value of karate as a means of self-improvement was a key point which Funakoshi became expert at describing when lecturing about karate. He widened the scope in regards to who should practice karate. He stated that karate "should be simple enough to be practiced without undue difficulty by everybody, young and old, boys and girls, men and women." His opinion that karate training can contribute to both mental and physical health must have some genesis in his recovery from poor health during early youth. He further described benefits of practice in the following way. "Karate-do is not merely a sport that teaches how to strike and kick; it is also a defense against illness and disease." Because of this way of viewing the value of karate, it began to make the all-important transition from jutsu (technique) to do (way).

During the years 1914 and 1915, a group that included Mabuni, Motobu, Kyan, Gusukuma, Ogasu, Tokumura, Ishikawa, Yahiku, and Funakoshi gave many demonstrations throughout Okinawa. This practice would have been quite unheard of during the earlier period of secrecy. It was due to the tireless efforts of this group in popularizing karate through lectures and demonstration tours that karate became well known to the Okinawan public.

Funakoshi's background as an educator was helpful for presenting ideas in concise and systematic fashion. Funakoshi pioneered the organization of karate instruction into three fundamental categories of practice: kihon, kata, and kumite.

Master Jigoro Kano, the father of modern judo, was instrumental in acknowledging karate as a valued Japanese martial art and in encouraging Funakoshi to stay in Japan. Even several sumo wrestlers became students of karate-do during this early period. They clearly recognized a noteworthy and potent martial art. During a period where Funakoshi wasn't able to use floor space at the Meisei Juku, H. Nakayama, a great kendo instructor, offered Funakoshi the use of his dojo when not in use.

Later, the time came when constructing Funakoshi's own dojo was ripe. About 1935, supporters gathered sufficient funds to construct the first karate dojo in Japan

and in 1936 it was dedicated as the Shoto-kan.

Other

qualities had to be learned before Funakoshi could become a successful pioneer. He gained a great sense of humility and modesty from Azato and Itosu. "If they taught me nothing else, I would have profited by the example they set of humility and modesty in all dealings with their fellow human beings." These qualities were clearly evident when, struggling to make a living upon arrival in Japan, Funakoshi swept the floors and grounds of the Meisei Juku.

Because of his study with the other prominent karate masters of the day, his integrity and fairness, and his respected position as an educator, Funakoshi evolved into the primary Okinawan karate "public relations" spokesman. He represented a unique blend of well-rounded physical expertise, intelligence, foresight, and conviction. He was articulate, sensitive to tradition and propriety, appropriately humble, and conveyed a sense of balance. Funakoshi felt the pull of Japan and found a nation fertile with eagerness for a martial art with the depth of challenge that karate-do represented. This is surely part of the reason Funakoshi had difficulty ever leaving Japan to return to his family in Okinawa.