

A Brief History of Shotokan Karate

The 4th September 2006 signifies a great deal to us, the team. It is the day when we begin a project that will hopefully live long into the future, and have a resounding affect on all who get involved. Today, in our small way, we are doing something positive for the world of Karate.

The karate world, for decades, has been far too pre-occupied with power, money and politics. Many people seem interested in doing karate for every other reason other than because they love it. For us, the team, this is where it all ends. We don't care who you are, where you are from, or what your personal beliefs are. The Shotokan Way is dedicated to you. Like the Japanese Masters who changed the world in their small way, you too will carve the path for karate. It's through your practice that the future of karate will be determined, and without realizing it, you are having an effect on the way karate will be practiced from today onward.

Every time a butterfly flaps its wings, a breeze is felt the other side of the world. For every action comes re-action, a principle held dear in Karate-Do. Just as insignificant as a butterfly, or as important as a Politician, your actions affect others. We at the Shotokan Way want to help your actions become amplified and heard by the world. The 4th September is an important date, but to appreciate where our karate is going, we need to understand where it has come from.

The history of Martial Arts is shrouded in mystery, legend and secrecy. It is generally believed that the first ever form of a martial art was created over 1000 years ago by a monk named Bodhidharma. He was the founder of Zen Buddhism, and eventually took his teachings to China.

He travelled to the Shoalin Temple where he began teaching the monks that resided there. At first they were physically unable to keep up with his teachings, and so Bodhidharma devised a training system to develop the monks both physically and spiritually. The Shaolin Monks became known as the best fighters in China and the system by which they were taught became known as Shaolin boxing. The Shaolin Monks travelled from China to spread the word of Bodhidharma and his fighting system. Zen was readily accepted in Japan.

One of the most devout followers of the Buddhist religion was Sho Shin. His father was King Sho En, ruler of Okinawa, and Sho Shin became King at the age of just 13 in 1477. Due to his devout religious beliefs, one of the first things he did during his reign was to ban all weapons. This ban was continued by the Satsuma clan. Those who studied martial arts now had to do so without any form of weaponry.

In 1609 Japan invaded Okinawa, and further to the ban on weaponry, placed a ban upon anyone doing martial arts, and so martial arts training became shrouded in secrecy.

Over the next 300 years in Okinawa - during the long reigning ban on martial arts - three main branches of self defense became evident. These were Shuri-te, Naha-te and Tomari-te, named after the Okinawan towns within which they developed. They were known collectively as Okinawa-Te or Tode.

Eventually these developed into two main styles, Shorin-ryu which developed from Shuri and Tomari and Shorei-ryu which came from Naha. It is believed that Shorin-ryu was best for smaller men, with a light and fast style. Shorei-ryu was suited to the bigger, more powerful man.

Gichin Funakoshi was born in 1868 and began studying martial arts at a very young age, under Anko Itosu and Yasutsune Azato. The ban on martial arts still stood, and so Funakoshi would often have lessons with his instructors at night time, so not to be discovered.

Tode, the martial arts of Okinawa could also be pronounced 'kara' and Funakoshi gave this the alternative meaning of 'empty' and so his training became known as Karate.

The ban on martial arts was finally lifted in 1902 when Shintaro Ogawa, the Commissioner of Education recommended that martial arts should be included in physical education in the first middle school of Okinawa.

This meant that Funakoshi could continue his training in without fear of discovery, and he could now spread the word of his karate.

Funakoshi was invited to Japan in 1922 to give a demonstration of Karate at the First National Athletic Exhibition in Tokyo, which was organized by the Ministry of Education. After this demonstration he decided to remain in Japan to spread the word.

It is thanks to his efforts that Karate became part of the school curriculum in Japan.

The style name Shotokan was given to Funakoshi's karate by his students. Shoto was Funakoshi's pen name as a writer, meaning 'pine waves' and Kan means 'school' so those who trained at Funakoshi's 'school' became known as the Shotokan.

In 1948 Funakoshi established the Japan Karate Association and he remained the head of the JKA until his death in 1957.

Nakayama was a senior student of the JKA and took over the role of head of the Association.

Nakayama began studying Shotokan under Funakoshi Sensei, at Takushoku University in 1932.

Now Nakayama is held responsible for the worldwide development of Shotokan Karate. Nakayama developed a way of logically teaching karate. He decided that it was best to devise a way of teaching different abilities easily. He developed the instructor program and karate's first ever match system.

It is thanks to Nakayama Sensei that karate is as successful a martial art as it is today. Nakayama Sensei passed away in 1987, at the age of 74

The current Shotokan that we know has developed since through so many great people, and will continue to develop with the help of those teaching today. It will be the current generation of Instructors that will forge the path for future Shotokan Karate. Everyone has an effect. Every time you kiai, a whisper will be heard the other side of the world.

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