

空手

(船越 義珍) *Funakoshi Gichin*

The founder of modern day karate

3rd Dan Research project

By Vincenzo Olma

*The ultimate aim of Karate lies neither in victory nor defeat
but in the perfection of character of its participants*



My interpretation of a great master

In writing briefly about Master Gichin Funakoshi's life I did not want to simply reiterate the facts in chronological order. Instead, I wanted to create an interesting story about his life that also allowed me to express my views and comparisons, including the impact his philosophy has had on my personal development. I hope that after reading this, those who do not understand karate or its values can come away with some understanding of this martial art and what a great teacher Master Gichin Funakoshi was.

Master Gichin Funakoshi died at the age of 88, when life expectancy at the time was only about 50. This reveals a great deal about his strength of character.

Despite being born into a well to do family of scholars, Master Funakoshi did not gain any advantage from this. His father was, unfortunately, a drunk and squandered most of

the family's wealth; he therefore grew up in a home with few luxuries.

As a hard working man Master Funakoshi first got a job as an assistant school teacher at the age of 21. It was around this time that he got married. He had a salary of approximately three dollars per month on which he had to support his wife, parents and grandparents. This income was insufficient to support everyone, therefore his wife, Rensa, also had to work.

In spite of these early difficulties, I believe Master Funakoshi achieved so much in his life becoming a teacher, author and master of karate. However, this was not his original plan as he wanted to pursue a career in medicine. Unfortunately, his family's defiance against the abolition of the Japanese Topknot (A topknot or chon mage (hair style) was worn by Japanese warrior class before the Meiji restoration of 1867, when it was made illegal) meant that he could not go to medical school. Therefore he chose to study Chinese and Japanese philosophy.

Master Gichin Funakoshi was an avid poet, going for long walks in the forest to recite his poetry and to meditate. I believe that meditation is one of the most important parts of karate. In our association we end each lesson with mokuso, the purpose of which is to close ones eyes, empty the mind, relax and let go of any aggression. Once the mind is clear one can focus on the future with clear, dispassionate objectivity.

One of Master Funakoshi's students, Mas Oyama,(a master in his own right) did not like this intellectual approach to karate as he thought it was too slow and more like a lesson in discipline, rather than an aggressive form of self defence. Therefore he left Shotokan and studied Goju-ryu but was still dissatisfied with the lack of aggression. Hence he started Shinkai karate. Mas Oyama, who founded [Kyokushinkai](#), arguably the first and most influential style of [full contact karate](#).

Master Funakoshi never intended karate to be used as an offensive art; he taught his students that it should never be used for self defence or as even a last resort. At first, I found this hard to understand. Although I am not an aggressive person, and I would not like to inflict pain on any one unnecessarily, I used to be of the view if I had no other option then I would hope that I would be able to use what I have been taught to defend myself. After researching Gichin Funakoshi's life, I found this to be the **wrong** way of thinking. In particular, I discovered a proverb that was told to him by Soken Matsumora

“When two tigers fight one is bound to get hurt, the other one will be dead”.

My interpretation of this proverb is no matter what situation you are in, there is always an alternative and you must never get frustrated or lose your temper. Personally, I have found this to be the most difficult lesson to learn in karate. Indeed I have struggled to control my emotions at times when frustrated. However, after failing to pass my Nidan at the first attempt, I have made a conscious decision to work on this aspect of my character. Studying for my 3rd Dan has helped me make significant progress towards this goal and I have become a more humble karateka in the process.

Almost everything I have read about Master Gichin Funakoshi states that he was a sickly and weak child. However, the cause of his health problems is not clear. Was it because of his father's drinking? Did his father's behaviour affect him adversely? Or was it

because by nature he had a quiet, timid and reserved character? Whatever the cause the fact remains, that his whole way of life changed when he went to primary school.

Starting school helped him communicate and interact with other children. More importantly he became friendly with two students. The first was Yasutsume Azato, whose father was a karate Master that served as a military chief for the king. The friendship with the Azato family developed to the point where Master Azato took Gichin Funakoshi under his wing as his first student. Master Funakoshi visited their home to practice in the evenings, when at that time it was illegal to teach, learn or use karate in Japan. The second friend, Itosu also had a karate background but a different style to Master Azato's.

Master Funakoshi was to learn both styles and combine them to eventually become "**Shotokan**" Karate. He studied rigorously and at the age of 53 left for Tokyo to spread karate to Japan. Master Funakoshi was so proficient at karate that he was chosen to teach it to the king of Okinawa.

In 1922 the Japanese education ministry organised the first exhibition of sport. The ministry wanted a comprehensive demonstration of all types of athletic endeavour and decided to include karate. Master Funakoshi was the obvious choice to lead the event. The ministry of education was so impressed with his teaching they wanted to introduce karate into school as part of the national curriculum.

In 1936 Sensei Funakoshi built his first Dojo in Tokyo. However, he wanted to change the whole concept of karate starting with the interpretation of the name. Karate was originally known as "Chinese Hand" but Master Funakoshi thought it misled people into believing it originated from Chinese boxing, borrowing many aspects of it. He therefore wanted karate to be interpreted as "Empty Hand" i.e. **No weapons**. He wanted to extend this concept further to include emptying the mind, cleansing it from improper thoughts and being humble. This idea met with opposition from other karate masters but his style eventually gained widespread approval to eventually become one of the most popular forms of karate today.

In my view, Gichin Funakoshi had the perfect character to teach karate to the world. He was a mild mannered man who was not bossy or aggressive; he was very warm and approachable. When he taught karate he would be firm, strict but fair. I therefore believe his method of teaching is the most effective way of helping students perfect their character.

I feel the lesson in karate is not to learn how to fight but to develop your mental and

physical strength. Karate has taught me about discipline, etiquette, honour and respect, but most of all to be humble. After researching further into Master Funakoshi's life, it has changed my way of thinking about karate. I now believe that it is unnecessary to prove anything to anyone. I try to teach these values to my students so that they can also start building a firm foundation in life. To me this is the most satisfying part of teaching.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There are numerous writings about Master Funakoshi and his life. I have tried to give my own interpretation of his life and how it has affected me.

As a weak and sickly child Gichin Funakoshi met two friends that would change his outlook of life forever. By studying karate and excelling in this art he became a great karate master and excelled in everything he did, both inside and outside the dojo. Master Funakoshi was a very humble man and practiced what he taught. He was not selfish and shared his vision with the world so other ordinary people could benefit from karate in the same way that he had. He wanted the values and morals of karate to carry on.

Master Gichin Funakoshi died quietly in his sleep on 26 April 1957. However, his legacy still lives on in the form of Shotokan Karate.

Shotokan was the nickname of the great Master coined by his students, which they posted above the entrance hall where he taught, **Shoto** being the wind in the pines outside his home, **Kan** meaning training hall. Hence **Shotokan** began.

A memorial was erected on 1st December 1968 at Kamakura, a part of which sums up the master's philosophy - **KARATE NI SENTE NASHI** - There is no first attack in karate.

A second stone features an inscription from people and students whose lives he changed, which gives a short overview of his life:-

“Funakoshi Gichin Sensei, of karate-do, was born on June 10, 1870, in Shuri Okinawa. From about eleven years old he began to study to-te jutsu under Azato Anko and Itosu Anko. He practiced diligently and in 1912 became the president of the Okinawan Shobukai. In May of 1922, he relocated to Tokyo and became a professional teacher of karate-do. He devoted his entire life to the development of karate-do. He lived out his eighty-eight years of life and left this world on April 26, 1957. Reinterpreting to-te jutsu, the Sensei promulgated karate-do while not losing its original philosophy. Like bugei (classical martial arts), so too is the pinnacle of karate “mu” (enlightenment): to purify and make one empty through the transformation from “jutsu” to “do”. Through his famous words “Karate ni sente nashi” (There is no first attack in Karate) and “Karate was kunshi no bugei” (Karate is the martial art of intelligent people); Sensei helped us to better understand the term “Jutsu.” In an effort to commemorate his virtue and great contributions to modern karate-do as a pioneer, we, his loyal students, organised the Shotokai and erected this monument at the Enkakuji. “Kenzen ichi”



The first and Zen are one

Sources:-

Gichin Funakoshi Wikipedia

Fightmaster.com

Shotokai.com

Shotokankarate.com

My way of life (Gichin Funakoshi)