

The history of karate

The true history of karate is impossible to trace due to the lack of written records and the secrecy surrounding its origin. However it is known that the martial arts of Japan and Okinawa had a strong influence from those of mainland Asia, mainly from the Chinese martial arts which in turn had Indian influences. The first Chinese influence on Japanese fighting techniques came as a result of the Zen teachings of the Shaolin monks who were widely recognised as the finest fighters in China, who had been taught their style of fighting by a Buddhist monk from India named Bodhidharma. The Shaolin Monks travelled to Japan to preach the Zen branch of Buddhism along with their fighting style, this was called Shorinji Kempo. This religion was soon accepted by the Samurai warrior class, it is this acceptance that led the Shaolin teachings to have an influence on all traditional Japanese fighting styles as the Samurai were the fighting elite, the Japanese equivalent of the Knights of Europe, and when it came to combat and fighting techniques, where they went other less prestigious fighting men followed.

Karate itself was developed on Okinawa, a small island 300 nautical miles to the south of Japan, 400 nautical miles to the east of China and 300 nautical miles to the north of Taiwan, it is this location, at the crossroads of some of the most important marine trade routes in Eastern Asia between countries such as Japan, China, Thailand and the Philippines among others that allowed Okinawan fighting techniques to develop further with influences from all over Asia. Possibly the most important factor in the development of Okinawan fighting styles was the introduction of an oppressive ruling regime in the form of King Sho Shin who ruled between 1477 and 1526, who forbade common people to possess weapons in order to keep the peace and remove the threat of any meaningfully armed rebellion, this ban was continued by the Japanese Satsuma Clan who took over the island in 1690. The ban on weapons caused the native combat schools to go underground and start training in secret as discovery would have led to arrest and punishment, as the rulers would have seen these training schools as a threat to be removed. One other factor which had a huge impact on Okinawan martial arts was the other martial arts brought by the foreign nobles who traded on the island, the major one being Chinese Kempo from Fukien Province in China.

Alongside these open hand fighting schools the people of Okinawa developed a sister martial art alongside Karate meaning empty hand called Kobudo meaning old martial way which used weapons such as the Bo, Sai, Tonfa, Yari and Nunchaku. It is rumoured that these weapons originated as traditional Okinawan farming tools but modern experts and historians have not been able to find proof of this, however it is possible as many of the weapons used are very similar to farming implements and tools still used in poorer, less developed areas of Japan. Some weapons, on the other hand such as the Sai and Yari (Spear) seem to have originated solely for the purpose of being weapons.

Karate developed mainly in 3 of the major towns on Okinawa, these were Shuri, Naha and Tomari. Each of these towns was the cultural centre point for a different class of people and so each developed its style to suit its need. Shuri was the main city for Kings and nobles and so developed Shuri Te which developed into the modern schools of Shotokan, Shitō-ryū, Shōrin-ryū, Shudokan, Shōrinji-ryū, and Motobu-ryū, Shure-Te is often seen as the most “Japanese” of the three early Karate styles. Naha was the city of the middle classes, such as merchants and land owners, and the style that developed there led such styles Gojo-Ryu and gave us Kata like Sanchin and Seishan. Naha-Te was influenced most by Chinese martial arts due to the large Chinese population in the Kume village in the City. Tomari was a much more low class city of fishermen and farmers, and the style it developed was very similar in style to Shuri-Te, giving us Kata like Rohai. Despite these differing foundations the towns of Shuri, Naha and Tomari are only a few miles apart and so the differences in their styles are more differences in emphasis and not so much style. Collectively the three styles were known as Okinawa-Te or Tode and gradually became divided into 2 distinct styles; one of these was Shorin-Ryu which developed from the Shuri and Naha schools. The other was Shorei-Ryu which developed from Tomari-Te.

Okinawa-Te continued to be practiced even after the end of Satsuma dominance over the island following a successful rebellion in 1872 and the only “enemies” were the other schools, in fact the only reason Karate came out of the shadows was because of a declaration by the Japanese education commissioner, Shintaro Ogawa in 1902 stating that Karate would be an excellent addition to the physical education curriculum in Okinawa’s first Middle school.

Despite the decline in the need for Karate as Jutsu (Art) and as a method of self-defence during the early 20th Century, Karate did remain popular as a method of character building and as a way of keeping fit, it also remained an important and valued part of the curriculum in first Okinawan schools and then schools all over Japan. Karate was taught in schools by such masters as Anko Itosu, Chojun Miyagi, Kenwa Mabuni, and Gichin Funakoshi, who is regarded as the father of modern karate.

Following the Defeat of Japan by the United States in 1945 many American soldiers who occupied the country in the following months learned these styles and brought them home, where they became very popular. One such soldier was Elvis Presley who later went on to adapt the techniques he learned in Japan to form his famous dance routines. The soldiers were followed by many of the Japanese masters who saw the west as an opportunity to spread their knowledge and maybe make good money. Since those first few masters left Japan, Karate has exploded onto the world stage becoming one of the most well-known martial arts to come from the Orient along with others such as Kendo, Taekwondo and Kung Fu.

Of course karate in the west is not just practiced as a way of keeping fit and as a way of building character, put it has branched out and taken on a completely new persona, that of

a sport, which is practiced in competitions world-wide, and runs parallel to traditional Karate and lacks many of its elements such as Budo. Modern Karate has also developed many new styles which combine different Japanese styles, one example of this is our Anshin-Ryu which combines Shotokan and Wado-Ryu.