

# Rebecca Johnson

## *Black Belt Karate Essay Gichin Funakoshi*

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If there was one man who could be credited with placing karate in its position today, it would be Gichin Funakoshi. This master (meijin) was born in the Okinawan capital of Shuri. He was born into a family of upper class, shizoku class. He began as a weak, sick young boy with poor health; therefore his parents brought him to "Yasutsune Itosu" where he trained in karate along with Yasutsune Azato.

After studying karate in depth, he developed such a disciplined mind and technique. Many people believe Azato is the reason why Gichin Funakoshi developed these essential qualities. His doctor prescribed him with various herbal remedies that would strengthen him; he then soon 'blossomed'.

Whilst he lived in his grandparent's house, he attended primary school and his classmate was Azato's son, he then also received his first karate instruction from Yatsutsune Azato. He finally came to Japan, from Okinawa in 1922. He lived in a small room at the 'prefectural student's dormitory' at Suidobata, Tokyo. He worked as a cleaner whilst also doing some gardening. At night, he taught the students karate. After a while, he earned enough money to open his first school in Meishojuku. Later from this, his shotokan in Mejiro was opened. People believe that in his travels around Japan he had his son with him; Yoshitaka. He gave demonstrations and lectures about Karate and shared his knowledge with others. His main instructors at this time were T. Shimoda and Y. Funakoshi.

Shimoda was believed to be an expert from the Nen-Ryu Kendo School whilst also studying Ninjutsu; this was an advantage to Gichin Funakoshi as he could share his knowledge with him and get the best training possible. Shimoda then died after falling sick in 1934 soon after one of his exhibition tours. Gigo Funakoshi soon stepped in for Shimoda after his death; he was technically highly qualified and had a tremendous nature. A student, Egami believed that there was nobody better qualified to take over their teaching. His training methods were thought to be vigorous and sometimes classified as brutally strong. Because of these methods people said he was not able to take the tough training, we understand that he left the school to explore his own style, Wado - Ryu (the harmonious way).

Yoshitaka's influence was very important for the future of Karate; however he died at the age of 39 in 1945 due to "tuberculosis". Martial Arts in Japan; particularly from the early twenties up to the early forties was an ultra nationalist moment in History. Many people looked down at any art that was not pure. Funakoshi overcame this injustice and finally gained official recognition of Karate as a Japanese martial art by 1941: Many karate clubs flourished on mainland Japan after this. In 1942 Karate was presented in Keio University and was the first Karate Club, others emerged after this; an example of one is in Tokyo University in 1929 however there were others. Another club was found in Shichi-Tokudo, situated in a corner of this palace grounds. Gichin visited Shichi-Tokudo every other day to teach the people Karate and to help them gain knowledge and understanding in the martial art.

Whilst Ohtsuka was teaching (Ohtsuka accompanied Gichin whilst giving demonstrations and he was also a student) a student named Kogura took a sword and faced Ohtsuka. The surrounding students believed that no one could face the open blade (shinken) held by a Kendo expert (he was a sandegree expert in kendo (3<sup>rd</sup> Degree). Ohtsuka watched calmly and when Kogura made an effort with the sword, Ohtsuka swept him off his feet; this showed how highly skillful he was.

In 1927 three men called Miki, Bo and Hirayama tried to introduce free-fighting (Jiyu Kumite) as they believed Kata practice was not enough when it came to having to defend yourself in real life situations, therefore they introduced protective clothing and used 'kendo' masks in their matches to reduce the effects of full contact sparring. Gichin Funakoshi heard about this and he didn't like the idea of Karate being a "sport". He considered it to be belittling the art of karate and instead of it being an art, he believed this idea was symbolising Karate as a sport. He then stopped visiting the Shichi-Tokudo, both Funakoshi and Ohtsuka never showed up again. After this Gichin Funakoshi prohibited sport sparring.

\*The first competition didn't appear until after Gichin Funakoshi died in 1958.

Gichin Funakoshi was known to teach sixteen Kata when he came to mainland Japan these were: five Pinan; three naihanchi; Kushanku Dai; kushanku sho, seisan, patsai, wanshu, Chinto, Jutte and lion. He taught his students the basic ones before they progressed onto the more advanced Kata. This is very similar to modern day Karate as the belt depends on what Kata you learn, however the basic Kata have to be known until a Karate student can move onto their next Kata. Later, the curriculum included approximately forty Kata; these were included in the work by Shingeru Egami, "Karate-do for the Specialist". This also indicated that the training received by Master Gichin Funakoshi paid off very well; it was very repetitious and helped drill the techniques into his head, improving in knowledge and performance. His students went on to develop the most accurate type of Karate taught anywhere.

Gichin Funakoshi was then invited to perform at the Kodokan (located at Tomisaka). He was invited by the founder of modern Judo, Jigoro Kano. Many people watched his performance; he displayed the Koshokun (Kushanku Dai). Sensei Kano watched the performance closely and asked Gichin for advice about the techniques used within his performance as he was very impressed. He

then went on to invite Funakoshi to dinner where he made jokes and talked with humor to make Funakoshi feel welcome and to become friends.

Gichin Funakoshi was a humble man, he often preached. He was a man of Tao because he didn't place any emphasis on breaking records and winning competitions, he placed his emphasis of individual self protection, he believed in respect and decency which he gave to others; he was the master of masters. This is related to the parable of "A man of Tao (Do) and a little Man".

### **THE PARABLE OF "A OF TOA (DO) AND A LITTLE MAN"**

A student once asked, "What is the difference between a man of Toa and a little man?" the Sensei replies "It is simple. When the little man receives his first Dan, he can hardly wait to run home and shout at the top of his voice to tell everyone he has obtained his first Dan. Once he has received his second Dan he will climb to the rooftops and shout to the people. When receiving his third Dan he will jump to his automobile and parade through town, blowing the horn, telling everyone about his achievement. The sensei continues, "When the man of Tao receives his first Dan, he will bow his head in gratitude. When receiving his second Dan, he will bow his head and his shoulders and when receiving his third Dan he will bow at the waist and walk beside the wall so that people will not see or notice him". Gichin Funakoshi died in 1957 after making a huge contribution to the art of karate; he was 89 years old and has been remembered and aspired to by many artists all over the world today. He will also remain in Karate History for a very long time.

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Personal Opinion: When writing this essay I have gained in knowledge about the life of a very spectacular but humble Karate Master. I have learnt how he was a great martial artist and how he shared all that he knew with the people that he taught. I have also learnt that he was a man of Tao and that his attitude set him apart from many other people. His strength from the mind was what made him what he was. He was very respectful and put others before him, by writing this essay towards my grading I believe it has expanded my knowledge and now I can look to his achievements to aspire to and hopefully one day I can be a great martial artist, learning how to train my mind and body, putting others before myself. Karate is a way of life, not a sport.

