History of Karate

(James Boyd – Karateka)

It is thought that 1,500 years ago (5th or 6th Century AD) a young Buddhist monk called Bodhi Dharma invented a way of self-defence that was possibly the original form of Karate. He travelled from India to China through the Himalayas using his hands to defend himself. His religion prevented him from carrying weapons. Once in China, he passed his skills to the local Shaolin Monks and eventually his system developed into a very strong martial art that gave those who practiced it, strength and confidence.

There were many other forms of well-established fighting styles, making it very difficult to be sure that Bodhi Dharma's system was in fact the one that grew into the Karate we practise today. While it may be that his system was one of many that contributed to the development of Karate it is clear that he had a strong influence in the formation of early martial arts from which Karate developed. These martial arts (including Bodhi Dharma's) were transferred from place to place by merchants and travellers.

The Okinawan island of Ryukyu is situated between Japan and Taiwan, and was an important trading post where peoples of Asia mixed and shared cultures. It is here that Karate developed into a striking art using punching, kicking, knee and elbow strikes, and open-handed techniques such as knife-hands. The development of karate continued over the years, mainly in three Okinawan towns of Naha, Shuri and Tomari. Development was encouraged by King Sho Shin (15th/16th centuries) who banned the use of weapons on Okinawa. The people of Okinawa needed empty handed techniques of restraint and defence.

Okinawans were able to develop an empty-handed fighting system that became the Karate we know today. They are known to have combined an ancient Chinese martial art called Chuan-Fa (the precursor of Kung Fu), and another fighting system called "Tode". The combination of these fighting systems became a unique style called Okinawa-te (or "Te", which means "hand"). The original Te consisted of punches, kicks and jumps, as well as blocking techniques. It was after a man called Sokon Matsumura put together a collection of moves, that Karate started resembling the martial art we know now. The moves were called "Kata".

Several styles of Karate branched out from the original system. The word "Ryu" means "Style". For example the style developed in the city of Shuri became Shuri-Te, and eventually became Shorin-Ryu. Shorin is the Japanese word for Shaolin, which suggest that Shorin-Ryu is a direct descendant of Bodhi Dharma's system.

Karate was added to the school curriculum on Okinawa in the early 20th century, focusing on kihon and kata as the basic principles, it soon started to become popular on the Japanese mainland. In 1917 the Japanese Ministry of Education invited Gichin Funakoshi* to Tokyo to give a Karate demonstration at the Butoku-den in Kyoto which impressed many Japanese people including the Crown-Prince Hirohito. In 1924 Keio University established the first university Karate club in Japan and by 1932 most major Japanese universities had Karate clubs. Techniques were made official, a uniform (gi) was introduced, and the *dan* ranking system was brought in as a way of grading levels of *karateka* (student of Karate). Gichin Funakoshi continued his teaching and it is through him that Karate became a way of life for the Japanese, rather than just self-defence.

During conflict between China and Japan, the Japanese military changed Karate's name from 唐手 ("Chinese hand") to 空手 ("empty hand"), both of which are pronounced Karate, to show that the Japanese wanted to develop this martial art in a Japanese way.

Karate spread across the world after the Second World War when Okinawa became a large U.S military base, and Karate became popular among servicemen stationed there. Soon after the martial art movies of the 60's and 70's Karate schools started developing all over the world. Kumite (sparring) was introduced and the modern sport of Karate was born. Some traditionalists were unhappy with the focus on fighting.

Shigeru Egami, Chief Instructor of Shotokan Dojo, quoted "*that the majority of followers of karate in overseas countries pursue karate only for its fighting techniques...Movies and television...depict karate as a mysterious way of fighting capable of causing death or injury with a single blow...the mass media present a pseudo art far from the real thing.*" Shoshin Nagamine said "*Karate may be considered as the conflict within oneself or as a life-long marathon which can be won only through self-discipline, hard training and one's own creative efforts.*"

Despite the quotes from Shoshin Nagamine it is clear that many people use the teachings of Karate as a way of life. Karate-do principles can have a spiritual meaning for many. Gichin Funakoshi called his autobiography *Karate-Do: My Way of Life*. This was the foundation of his teaching.

Today there are flavours of Karate to suit differing tastes with modern Karate concentrating solely on competition, while the more traditional type focusing strongly on the guiding principles taught by Gichin Funakoshi, the same principles of discipline, self-control and power which were established by the people of Okinawa centuries ago.

*Gichin Funakoshi

Gichin Funakoshi (船越 義珍 *Funakoshi Gichin*, November 10, 1868 – April 26, 1957) was the creator of Shotokan karate, perhaps the most widely known style of karate, and he is considered as the father of modern karate. Following the teachings of Anko Itosu, he was one of the Okinawan karate masters who introduced karate to the Japanese mainland between 1917 and 1922. He taught karate at various Japanese universities and became honorary head of the Japan Karate Association in 1949.