

the history of karate

The history of karate is extremely vast and complex as there are many different versions and opinions on how karate was developed, not much is known about the development of karate until it arrived in Okinawa.

In the early stages, karate was an indigenous form of closed fist fighting developed in Okinawa and was referred to as “te” (hand), it is because of the weapons bans that were put in place in various points in their history that encouraged the constant improvement of the empty hand techniques, and why they trained in secret. Further improvements came from the influence of other martial arts brought to the island by trade merchant and nobles.

The development of karate continued over the years, mainly in three Okinawan towns which were: Naha, Shuri and Tomari each of these three towns had their own kind of society which is why different forms of self defence developed in each of the towns which later became known as Naha-te Shuri-te and Tomari-te they were also referred to as “tode” (Chinese hand), slowly but surely karate was divided into two main groups which were: Shorin-ryu, which was developed in the region of Shuri and Tomari, and Shorei-ryu which was developed in Naha. The towns of Shuri, Naha and Tomari were only a few miles apart so there was not a huge difference between their styles. One of the main differences is that the styles were based on the different physical requirements of the people within the towns.

Shorin-ryu was fast and linear with natural breathing; however Shorei-ryu emphasized sturdy, rooted movements with the breathing being in time with each movement, this concept of two basic styles also exists within Kung-fu

The Chinese character that is used to write the word “tode” can also be pronounced as “Kara” eventually “te” was replaced with “kara te” (karate) by the Okinawan masters, this was later to be changed to “karate-do” by Gichen Funakoshi, the “do” in karate-do means “way” or the “path” which is indicative of the philosophy and discipline that is involved within karate. However Gichen Funakoshi adopted a different meaning for the Chinese character “kara” which was “empty” it is for this reason that karate came to mean “empty hand”.

In 1917 the first public demonstration of karate in Japan was given, by Gichen Funakoshi at the Butoku-den in Kyoto, the demonstration impressed many Japanese people including the Crown-Prince Hirohito. In 1922 Dr. Jano Kano who was the founder of Judo, invited Gichen Funakoshi to give a demonstration at the Kodokan dojo and to stay in Japan to teach karate, this turn of events was vital in establishing a base for karate in Japan.

The four main styles of karate in Japan today are:

- Shotokan: Gichen Funakoshi founded this style in Tokyo. Gichen Funakoshi is considered to be the father of modern day karate. Shotokan is characterized by strong stances and powerful linear techniques.
- Shito-ryu: this style was founded by Kenwa Mabuni and was influenced greatly by both Naha-te and Shuri-te; the Shito-ryu system uses a lot of kata and emphasizes power on the execution of the technique.
- Wado-ryu: Wado-ryu was founded by Hienori Otsuka; this was developed from Jujitsu and Karate. This style uses basic movements from Jujitsu and Karate, emphasizing softness and the way of harmony and spiritual discipline.
- Goju-ryu: Goju-ryu was founded by Chojun Miyagi and was developed from the Naha-te system; this style combines soft circular blocking techniques with fast and strong counter attacking.

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