

History of Karate

The history of Martial Arts is shrouded in mystery, legend and secrecy. It is widely believed that the first form of a martial art was created as early as the fifth century BC when Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk from India, arrived in Shaolin in China and began to teach Zen Buddhism. He is said to have introduced a systematised set of exercises designed to strengthen the mind and body which form the basis of many martial arts today. Certainly, the Chinese emperor Shi-Huang-Di (221-206 BC) was buried with an army of some 7,000 life-size figures including figures of officers, unarmed and in postures showing they used a fighting method remarkably similar to karate.

In truth, the origins of karate are somewhat obscure and little is known about the early development of karate until it appeared in Okinawa. Okinawa is the main island in the chain of Ryukyu Islands, which stretches from Japan to Taiwan. The islands have been a part of Japan since 1879, but before then the Ryukyu Kingdom was an independent state, playing an important trading role between China, Japan and the rest of the world. It was subject to many international influences, including a form of unarmed combat introduced by merchants trading with China. This was to develop into karate.

Weapons bans, imposed on the Okinawans at various points in their history, encouraged the refinement of empty-hand techniques ('kara' means empty and "te" means hand). In 1609 Japan invaded Okinawa, and placed a ban upon anyone doing martial arts. Training became shrouded in secrecy but te continued to develop over the years. Different styles developed among different families/classes, with three main branches evolving: Shuri-te, Naha-te and Tomari-te - named after the Okinawan towns within which they developed.

Gichin Funakoshi was born in 1868 and began studying martial arts at a very young age, when the ban on martial arts still stood. The ban on martial arts was finally lifted in 1902.



In 1922 Funakoshi moved to mainland Japan and began to blend the fighting skills taught to him in Okinawa with the Japanese martial philosophy of budo to create karate. He developed the art and consolidated its position in Japan. The universities were the main sites of karate study, and they were influenced by research on physiology and calisthenics. The stances were studied and strengthened by being made lower so as to apply dynamic controlled stress to the leg muscles, and the effect of hip rotation on punches and kicks was also examined. This resulted in an increase in the power of punching and kicking techniques we see today.

There are several styles of karate. Hale Karate Club trains students in the Shotokan style; generally considered to be the most powerful and dynamic of the Japanese systems, and the most comprehensive in the range of its techniques and the number and diversity of its kata.

The style was constructed by Funakoshi Gichin, who introduced it to Japan. The name is taken from that of his first specialist dojo: it derives from his pen name, "shoto", meaning "pine waves" and "kan", meaning hall. It soon became the name for Funakoshi's style of karate.

The style was developed extensively by the Japanese Master, Masatoshi Nakayama. It has since spread to become the most widely practised style of karate throughout the world.

