

Revisiting the genius of Master Yoshitaka Funakoshi

It is interesting to consider that since Karate began, it would be no exaggeration to say that as a martial art that incorporates kicking and punching, Karate has existed to achieve only one goal. Namely, to defeat an opponent with one technique — to attempt "one attack — one kill". There are only a handful of people about whom we can say have actually achieved this goal. The one man in recent times to have achieved this level is Yoshitaka Funakoshi.

The man with the natural gift

Approximately 90 years have passed since Karate was brought to mainland Japan (Honshu). Over the years countless stories of feats of various Karate practitioners have been passed down through the years. However at most there are only a handful of people who we could apply the title genius.

In this issue we would like to tell you of one such genius, at a time in history when Karate was being introduced to Mainland Japan for the first time. This is considered the dawn of a new era for Karate, and his name is Yoshitaka Funakoshi.

He was born in Shun, Okinawa, where for 450 years the Ryu Kyu dynasty flourished.

His father, Gichin Funakoshi, who is known as the "Father of modern Karate-do", is largely given credit for introducing Karate to Mainland Japan.

From the time he was boy, Yoshitaka trained and polished his technique under Itosu Sensei along with his father. Yoshitaka was one of three brothers, and stood out from his siblings as one of impressive talent in Karate. He came to Tokyo at 17 years old and lived on his father.

Fully grown, Yoshitaka was approximately 160 cm, and had a thick boned stocky build so often characteristic of Okinawan people. He had bright eyes that shone from underneath thick eyebrows and overflowed with a sense of power. He was truly an individual who was born to do Karate. In addition, he showed great enthusiasm for training, and was always working to perfect his technique.

in 13 years a big change was to come to the Karate world. Who would be the successor to the great "father of modern Karate-do", Gichin Funakoshi?

When Yoshitaka turned 30 years old, his elder brother, Yoshihide, encouraged him to follow in his father's footsteps. Yoshitaka refused at first. However, after receiving many pleas from students, and supporters he finally agreed to accept the offer to pursue a

life of teaching Karate and take the title "Shihandai". Once he made his decision, he quickly went about the task of working hard to become a successor to his great father.

The first thing to be done was to build the first Karate Dojo in Japan, which was called "Shotokan". In a short time the Shotokan dojo was established, and it soon became associated with Karate, and stood "shoulder to shoulder" with the likes of such famous martial arts institutions as Kodokan Judo, and Yushinkan Kendo. The dojo became packed with students. Yoshitaka had a never ending passion for his art.

Yoshitaka's dream was to bring students together to diligently train, and forge their technique in this system of Karate that his father brought to the mainland. He longed to help people understand the beauty that is Karate.

To that end, he concentrated wholeheartedly on his research, and continued to perfect his technique. He took the leading role in creating Taikyoku Kata, and Ten no Kata as Kumite Kata. He studied Bo and other Ryukyu Kobudo weapons systems, and also created the Bo Kata known as "Matsukaze".

This is how Yoshitaka achieved the building and maintenance of a technical system of Karate known as Shotokan, which would later spread throughout the world in popularity.

With the curse of disease, the aspiration dies.....

Suddenly Yoshitaka was struck with a pulmonary infection, where the lungs become infected. This was not an incurable disease, and all that he needed was penicillin (A very effective antibiotic drug). However, this was the end of World War II and basic resources in Japan were scarce. As a result the illness became worse and worse.

Penicillin was only readily available in Japan several months after Yoshitaka became ill. By this time it was already too late. Apparently, Yoshitaka lied in his futon and weakly held an ampule of penicillin, and murmured "well so this is Penicillin?!".

"Those of you practicing Karate from now on mustn't go your own way. You must all work together in a strong cohesive group" Yoshitaka reportedly said. November 24, 1945 along with the fires of war, the future of Karate suddenly took on a bleak outlook, and quietly closed a chapter of its life. Yoshitaka Funakoshi was 41 years old when he died.

This is a story that's 60 years old now. The Shotokan dojo burned along with the fires of war. Now all that remains are the memories, and a few documents. However, the legacy of Yoshitaka Funakoshi lives on in the hearts and technique of practitioners, and has even surpassed its own era in a way that continues to be spread with great fervor throughout the world.

What was the traditional Shotokan Dojo like?....

The first Karate dojo in (mainland) Japan was built on Master Gichin Funakoshi's property next to home in Mejiro, Tokyo in 1939. On the gate entering the dojo grounds there was a sign upon which was written "Shoto". Passing through the gate on your immediate right was a row of several Makiwara. On the left was Gichin Funakoshi's home. Walking straight ahead and approaching the dojo your Sempai would often make you stop and hit each Makiwara a number of times before you could enter the dojo for training. Next to Master Funakoshi's home there was a water faucet, and when you cut your knuckles on the Makiwara you would go wash your hands, and then return to the malciwara.

When finished with Makiwara training, you would enter the dojo. The dojo floor space was a relatively large 99 sq.m. (325 sq.ft.) As you enter the dojo, your eyes would immediately move to the far left end of the room to a spot slightly raised from the rest of the dojo floor. This is the spot from which Funakoshi Gichin could be seen observing training sessions. As many as three scrolls were hanging at the front of the dojo. At the front of the dojo, there was a corridor through which Yoshitaka and his father would enter the dojo from their home.

Facing the front of the dojo, to the right were shelves on which to store your clothing during practice. To the left was an area from which guests could watch practice sessions.

Training at Shotokan

There were two classes at Shotokan, one in the afternoon which Yoshitaka's father taught, and one in the evening that Yoshitaka taught. The two training sessions were quite different. While Gichin's afternoon class was based on the Karate of ancient Okinawa, Yoshitaka's workout was primarily based on the fundamentals that his father taught him, to further deepen the understanding of the Karate of his students. With this as a base, he incorporated many innovative ideas, and techniques. His spirit for inquiry was very strong. He was a Radiology Technician at the (Mombusho Taificu Iji soudan shitsu). There is an alledged story of how Yoshitaka used to go down to the Pathalogy lab where they kept bodies, and practice punching and striking on corpes to further develop his understanding of the effect of his techniques.

Consequently, to sum up Gichin's style in one word it would be "Shizen tai" (natural stance). To this the adage "Karate ni Kame nashi" (there is no posture in Karate) would apply.

Yoshitaka's style could be more accurately expressed as a gushing forth of a fighting spirit which is similar to what we see in modern Shotokan Karate.

The two teaching styles were also quite different. It might be because of the age difference, but Gichin taught in a very soft spoken manner, and would watch very

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intently over his students. Yoshitaka was a very vibrant outspoken teacher who used his body to express his teaching and was very popular with students.

Technique with no thought, is the purest technique

Nevertheless, it was well researched that training in the dojo was clearly based on Kata. First everyone would train in Heian Kata 1 —5. During this time the black belt sempai would look over the situation, and deliver punches and kicks to the students as appropriate. By the time the students did Heian san dan, they generally couldn't think of anything. "It's at this point the true technique is discovered. You musn't think, and then execute. You should truly have nothing in your mind at the "moment of truth" Yoshitaka is reported to have taught.

Incidentally, the Kata taught at the Shotokan dojo were few. Kata training was centered around Heim, Telcki, Jutte, and Bassai.

There is one interesting episode of a famous Karate who visited the Shotokan and left speechless after watching Yoshitaka remove his Gi and demonstrate Kata.

Yoshitaka's Makiwara

There was one Makiwara in between the house and the dojo. This had the special characteristic of being flexible enough so as to stick to your fist as you punched through. This was for Yoshitaka's private use.

There is a famous episode of Yoshitaka visiting Waseda University, where they had several stiff Makiwara. Yoshitaka cut them all down. The next day when he strolled into the dojo he reportedly barked, "The human body is flexible". Consequently there is no need to hit a Makiwara that is too stiff!"

In addition, let me add that Yoshitaka's older brother reportedly said "The principle of the Karate punch is to be able to walk and execute a punch from Shizentai and break a board that is hanging from a string"

In pursuit of the ideal "one attack, one kill"

Yoshitaka was truly a genius whose punches and kicks no one could follow. It is clear that this was the case with One Attack Fight. Yoshitaka could attack with lightening speed from a far distance after warning "Jodan!", and his student would not be able block in time.

It is said that his punch coming at you had the power and "pressure" was as though a wall were coming at you.

Its interesting to consider that, since the birth of Karate, it is no exaggeration to say that as a martial art that incorporates kicking and punching, Karate has existed to achieve only one goal. Namely, to defeat an opponent with one technique — to attempt "one attack — one kill". There are only a handful of people about whom this adage has actually been achieved. The one man in recent times to have achieved that level is Gigo Funakoshi.

In addition, World War II Japan was ripe with nationalistic feelings that are embodied in such sayings as "Uchiteshi Yaman" (Fight to the death), or "Ichioku Gyokusai" (Die together as a nation). Other sayings were "one attack, one kill" and "Allow a flesh cut, in order to break bones", and "you can't survive without defeating your opponent". Without this level of austere attitude toward training, achievement of the adage "One attack, one kill" would be difficult to attain. Therefore the students and teachers of the Shotokan dojo engaged in austere training with these precepts in mind. If you are too concerned about your personal safety, then you will be defeated. Another saying was, "under the crossing blades is hell, but one step in is heaven."

In this era of our current tournament system, technique may seem to be well developed, however the effectiveness of a single punch in the olden days was much more devastating.

At that time, if students from the various universities didn't come to Shotokan, then they couldn't receive a black belt. Furthermore, it is said that in Yalcusoku Kumite, attacks were extremely powerful and hard.

Students were also paired up to hit hands and feet, to train their bodies. Students were often seen struggling up the stairs at Mejiro Station after practice.

Meet the golden age of Yoshitaka

Okano Sensei was a rowdy young lad in Hachioji when he met Yoshitaka, and entered the Shotokan dojo in the fall of 1942. At that time Yoshitaka was already considered the number one person in the field of Karate. He was traveling back and forth to Okinawa, and researching and diligently studying Kata and Ryukyu weapons.

As a result he had a very good reputation. In fact you can see Yoshitaka's name in a book written by Masutatsu Oyama, the founder of Kyokushin Karate. Furthermore in the world of Karate, Yoshitaka was strongly admired for having very strong Kumite. It was also said that at he was the first to really research Mawashi geri (round kick).

According to Okano, Yoshitaka was a very well liked teacher, and Okano feels quite lucky to have received training from him during these golden years.

Yoshitaka Sensei's technique was nothing short of fearless and daunting. His kicks and punches were penetratingly sharp. His explanation of Kata had the power of coming across clear and practical. Training was very severe although he taught by example, and had a wonderful personality often joking during the practice.

According to Okano "since I lived in Hachioji, I usually had time between the end of practice and the last locomotive for Hachioji, so I generally stayed in the dojo alone to train. I was lucky that Yoshitaka would return to the dojo and spend time with me. I remember him giving the following advice "since you're a short guy, you should perfect your punching techniques rather than your kicks. You should also thrust forward with explosive kicking techniques to blast across the distance to your target".

"I was taught personally (man to man) by Yoshitaka Sensei (stances, etc.). In the train returning to Hachioji I would practice what I learned, and utilized the environment to cultivate my sense of balance." said Okano.

Okano Sensei rapidly distinguished himself from his Karate classmates. Normally students were able to attain black belt by the time they graduated from High School, however master Okano received his black belt by the time he graduated from his "old style" middle school (Kyusei Chugakko).

Separation with his teacher

After the war was over, and Okano was discharged from the military, he went to see Yoshitaka. However Okano's former teacher was suffering from Lung disease.

When the war was over Okano returned to his teacher. However at this time Yoshitaka was suffering from lung disease. Okano urged Yoshitaka to come to Hachioji for medical treatment, and he happily accepted. Okano Sensei began preparing to move his teacher to Hachioji, however on November 24, three months later, Yoshitaka Sensei died.

In the 1981 tournament pamphlet of the Kenkojuku Budokan 40 year commemoration Okano writes of his former teacher: "Yoshitaka, who was truly second to none in his Karate skill, came all the way to Tokyo from Okinawa, due to the old age of his father."

The death of Yoshitaka who achieved perfection in technique, great brilliance in Kata, tremendous strength in Kumite, and great abilities in all other aspects of the art, was devastating for Shotokan Karate, and for all of us who have made Karate a major part of our lives. This was as if a great pillar was removed from a great structure."

"Fundamentally I wanted to name my school "Yoshitaka-ha Shotokan" says Okano. However I was reluctant since I have incorporated my own waza, and didn't feel it would be fair to my teacher to apply his name to the total of my teachings. Okano remembers these words being spoken to him by Yoshitaka: "Those of you practicing Karate from now on mustn't go their own way. You must all work together in a strong cohesive

group." Okano said "Therefore I named my school Kenkojuku (School in which to humble oneself" rather than Kenkokan (Hall in which to humble oneself)."

The name of Yoshitaka is hidden in the shadows of history behind his great father's name. However, the life of Yoshitaka resonates today in the form of Master Okano who in his 70's still thrusts his arms into the sleeves in his Keiko Gi, and trains hard daily.

It can certainly be said that in Master Okano is the proof of the suitable person to carry on the legacy of research and dedicated training of orthodox Shotokan Karate that defined the life of Yoshitaka Funakoshi.

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