

Shotokan Karate

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Brief Overview/Basic Philosophy:

Karate is the world's most popular martial art, and Shotokan is karate's most popular style. Begun by an unassuming Okinawan poet and philosopher, Shotokan has grown into an immensely popular art practiced by millions the world over.

Shotokan's philosophy is simple – karate isn't about winning or losing, it's about perfecting the character of those who participate in it.

History and Origins:

Gichin Funakoshi was born in Shuri, Okinawa on November 10, 1868 into a low-ranking Pechin family (equivalent to the more well-known Samurai class in Japan). He met the son of Ankō Azato in grade school. Ankō Azato was a master of both karate and Jigen-ryū (an art dedicated to sword striking) and would become Funakoshi's first martial arts teacher.

Although he passed the entrance exam to medical school, his family was firmly against the modernization drive made by the Meiji government, and therefore would not be able to attend medical school because of it. Highly educated in Japanese and Chinese philosophy, he became an assistant teacher in Okinawa. His interest in karate increased, and he began to make nightly treks to learn from Asato.

Funakoshi's training included the two popular Okinawan arts of the late 19th Century – Shōrei-ryū and Shōrin-ryū. He began to train others in the arts he had learned and sought to continue teaching on the Japanese mainland, where he eventually moved in 1922. Two years after moving to Tokyo, Funakoshi adopted the belt system developed by judo's founder Kano Jigoro. That same year he adopted the white keikogi, now known as the karategi. He awarded the first eight *dan* (black belts) in Shotokan that year as well.

In 1930 he founded Dai-Nihon Karate-do Kenkyukai as a clearinghouse for information and teaching on the various arts of karate being practiced at the time. Six years after that he changed the name to Dai-Nippon Karate-do Shoto-kai. "Shoto" was Funakoshi's pen name, and it meant "waving pines." The association's name was later truncated to simply "Shotokai."

Tensions between China and Japan had been high for several years at that point, so in 1939 Funakoshi began to modify the terminology used in the Japanese martial arts. Seeking to distance them from kung fu, he changed the Japanese spelling of "karate" from "Chinese hand" to the homophone of "open hand." The term "open hand" also referenced Funakoshi's philosophy of a martial art that is not tied or anchored to any other object. Also in 1939, Funakoshi built his first dojo in Tokyo and named it "Shōtōkan," the name by which the art he developed is now known.

In 1949 several of Funakoshi's students organized the Japan Karate Association ostensibly to formalize his teachings. However, Funakoshi was not in complete agreement with all the changes they sought to make (for instance, JKA believed in competition between students, while

Funakoshi did not), and this led to the first great schism in Shotokan. Funakoshi continued to teach his art until he succumbed to cancer in 1957.

Training and Techniques:

Funakoshi described his philosophy in the *Shōtōkan nijū kun*, or “Twenty Instructions” first published in 1938. They are as follows:

- Karate begins and ends with a bow.
- Karate has no first strike.
- Karate is always on the side of justice.
- Know yourself first, then know others.
- Mentality is more important than technique.
- One’s heart must be free.
- Disaster is the product of being careless.
- Karate exists outside the dojo.
- The pursuit of karate is lifelong.
- The beauty of karate is in applying it to everything.
- Boiling water is a metaphor for karate – without the heat, it is simply lukewarm water.
- Don’t think of winning; think of not losing.
- Adjust based upon your opponent.
- How one handles emptiness and fullness is what decides the battle.
- Consider the hands and feet as swords.
- Outside your gate is a multitude of enemies.
- Formal stances are only for the beginner. As one advances, he learns to stand naturally.

- Execute *kata* (forms) precisely, but actual combat is something else entirely.
- Remember the assertion and withdrawal of force, the extension and retraction of the body, and the fast or slow execution of a technique.
- Always be mindful, faithful, and resourceful while pursuing the Way.

As written in the original Japanese, each principle is described as no more or less important as any of the others.

In practice, Shotokan developed the three main areas of training followed by most all karate disciplines: *kihon*, *kata*, and *kumite*.

Kihon are the basic or fundamental techniques used in all aspects of karate, like punches and kicks. Not only is the proper physical execution important, but also the correct mental and spiritual attitude in performing those punches and kicks.

Kata are choreographed progressions of a series of *kihon*. The *kata* are not meant to reproduce an actual engagement, but are instead intended to train the mind and body in how to move from one technique into another as seamlessly as possible. Shotokai teaches twenty *kata*, and JKA teaches 27 *kata*.

Kumite (“meeting of hands”) is sparring between or among students. At the beginning levels of Shotokan, the student is taught basic attacks to certain areas of an opponent. As the student progresses, one-step attacks are next taught. Later, students are allowed to engage in free sparring, engaging in any attack or defense deemed necessary at any given time. Students at the

highest levels are then taught *kaishu ippon kumite*, wherein the attacker names the technique, the defender blocks, then counters, and the attacker must block and counter *that* attack. This is more difficult than free sparring because retreating to regroup is not an option.

Uniforms and Rankings:

The uniform used in most Shotokan schools is the *karategi*, or simply “gi.” It was adapted from the *judogi*, save for the fact that *karategi* are typically half as heavy as those worn in judo. Most schools prescribe wearing a white gi, however different colors may be worn in performances, competitions, or demonstrations.

The rank system used in Shotokan is the *Kyū / Dan* system adapted from judo by Funakoshi in 1924. A new student starts as 10th *kyū* and works his way up to 1st *kyū*. At that point, he may advance to 1st *dan* and continue upwards, with a very few who master the art after a lifetime of study becoming eligible for the highest 10th *dan*.

The original belt system in Shotokan consisted of only three belts: eighth *kyū* through fourth *kyū* wore white, third *kyū* through first *kyū* wore brown, then first *dan* and up wore black. However, today’s schools often augment the white and brown belts with other systems including more colors and possibly stripes or dual colors to more closely indicate a student’s *kyū*.

Terms and Teachings:

Dan – ranking above the *Kyū* ranks, indicating a higher level of competence in karate.

Dojo – a karate school.

Gi – a karate uniform, typically white and made of moderately heavy canvas.

Kata – a form; a series of pre-arranged movements executed in succession to teach various applications of those moves.

Kihon – the fundamental, basic moves of karate, such as a punch, a kick, or a block.

Kumite – sparring between two karate practitioners that may range from no contact to full contact.

Kyū – the lower ranks of karate's grading system, indicating beginning or moderate experience and skill.

Sensei – karate teacher.

FAQ's:

Is the original Shotokan still in existence? Can I go visit it? Unfortunately, no. It was destroyed in World War II.

Are there competitions in Shotokan? Gichin Funakoshi did not believe in competition, preferring that the student dedicate himself to the *kata*. Therefore, Shotokai has no competitions. However, JKA conducts competitions, which was one of the reasons for the schism in the early days of Shotokan.

How widespread is Shotokan? Shotokan is the most popular type of karate. JKA has schools in over one hundred countries, and Shotokai has a similar worldwide presence.

Is there any grappling or ground techniques in Shotokan? Some schools teach such techniques, but Shotokan is generally understood to be a standing art, with contact ending once an opponent is on the ground.

Organizations dedicated to the Style:

Shotokai - <http://www.shotokai.jp/> - international Shotokan governing body founded by Gichin Funakoshi in 1930

Japan Karate Association - <http://jka.or.jp/> - international Shotokan governing body founded by Gichin Funakoshi's senior students in 1949

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