

Karate

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Brief Overview/Basic Philosophy:

Karate is one of the most popular martial arts in the world. Originally an art practiced by the indigenous people of the small volcanic islands between Japan and Taiwan, it has spread all over the world and is now practiced by tens of millions of people across every continent. The subject of many books, shows, movies, and other media, karate's ubiquity has made the name of the art a generic term for all Eastern martial arts. It is a holistic art that focuses on both the mind and body, and is versatile enough to be practiced by both the young and old alike.

History and Origins:

The art of karate has its origins on the island of Okinawa as the fighting art known as *te* (Japanese for "hand"). Three main schools of *te* existed in the early days – Naha-te, Shuri-te and Tomari-te – each named for the city in which it was developed. Indigenous in nature, the art was influenced by the Chinese martial arts due to the beginning of trade with the Ming Dynasty in 1372. *Te* became increasingly important to the population in 1477, when Shō Shin, the third king of the Second Shō Dynasty banned the ownership of weapons. The Japanese invasion in 1609 reinforced the weapons ban.

Te continued to develop and adopt Chinese techniques for the next few centuries, including incorporation of forms from Fujian and weapons from Southeast Asia. Kanga Sakugawa, a student of kung fu, began teaching his synthesized technique on Okinawa in 1762. His greatest student, Matsumura Sōkon, synthesized *te* and kung fu, which later became the Shōrin-ryū style.

Matsumura's top student Ankō Itosu subsequently developed a set of simplified forms for beginning students and had them introduced into Okinawa's schools. Itosu's influence in simplifying and spreading Shorin-ryu earned him the title among many as the grandfather of modern karate.

The three main Okinawan styles were later joined by a fourth in the early 20th Century, when Kanbun Uechi returned from Fujian and developed the Uechi-ryū style based upon the arts he studied in China.

One of Ankō Itosu's students, Kenwa Mabuni, developed a style synthesizing all three previous Okinawan Te styles, but seeking to balance the hard and the soft aspects of all three. His style came to be known as Shitō-ryū, which he began to teach on the mainland in 1929.

Another hard-soft style was developed and introduced to Japan in or around 1930. Chōjun Miyagi, an Okinawan student of Naha-te, traveled to Fujian twice for several months at a time. While there he learned the Six Qi Hands of the Shaolin Style (known in Japanese as "Rokkishu") and incorporated them into his *te*, calling it Goju-ryu, meaning "hard-soft style." The main emphasis in his style is character development and that the art must only be used for self-defense.

Gichin Funakoshi is considered to be the person responsible for introducing what became known as karate to the Japanese mainland in 1936. Although there were many other Okinawans teaching martial arts in Japan at the time, Funakoshi popularized the art by changing the terms of

the art from Chinese and Okinawan to Japanese. He christened his art “way of the empty hand,” or *karate* in Japanese. In order to develop more standardization in the teaching of karate, he developed the karategi uniform and the system of colored belts that are now used by many different martial arts. Although he himself called his art by that name throughout his life, the art he developed became known as Shotokan, which was the name of his school in Tokyo.

One of Funakoshi’s students, Hironori Ōtsuka, went on to synthesize Shotokan, jujutsu, and Shitō-ryū in an art that emphasized harmony and yielding over brute strength and physical force. His art, Wadō-ryū, teaches “body management,” that is, moving the body of both the defender and the attacker out of harm’s way. This style was first taught formally at Tokyo University in 1934.

In 1957, Masutatsu Oyama (born Choi Young-Eui in Japanese-occupied Korea) developed a new “full contact” style of karate by merging Shotokan and Gōjū-ryū. The new style, named Kyokushin (Japanese for “full truth”) emphasizes spiritual development, physical hardness, and strict training. Kyokushin’s tradition has been carried on into the present day by such practitioners as Georges St-Pierre, Bas Rutten, and Uriah Hall.

Training and Techniques:

There are three ways that karate is generally studied – as an art, as a sport, and as self-defense. Karate as an art focuses on developing positive virtues within the practitioner, like perseverance, self-discipline, and leadership. Karate as a sport involves enhancing one’s strength and stamina. Karate as self-defense emphasizes the theories and techniques of fighting off an attacker or group

of attackers with minimal harm to one's self. Regardless of the reason for study, karate is typically taught in three sections – fundamentals (*kihon*), forms (*kata*), and sparring (*kumite*).

Kihon are the basic motions upon which the other two sections are built – the basic punches, kicks, blocks, and stances that make up *kata*. These can be practiced individually or in groups, and often slowly and precisely until mastered. Just as in any other sport, the fundamentals are the foundation upon which the rest of the structure is built, and karate emphasizes them appropriately.

Kata are a pre-arranged set of *kihon* meant to teach the student further proficiency in the individual moves, how the moves transition from one another, and ultimately how those moves and series of moves will be effective in defending against an attacker. The beginning student is generally taught the simpler *kata*, and then increasingly difficult *kata* as he progresses up the ranks. Due to the fact that karate has so many different schools and branches, there is no one single set of *kata* that every student must learn. However, *kata* are used to judge proficiency for advancement in most karate schools.

The apex of karate training is *kumite*. Japanese for “grappling hands,” *kumite* incorporates the skills and techniques learned in *kihon* and *kata* and uses them against an opponent. *Kumite* teaches the student how to read his opponent, develops the speed needed for a successful block or attack, and helps to develop the control required for executing moves in a life-like situation. *Kumite* can be practiced among the students of one school, or schools can form tournaments to match students from different schools. Depending on the rank and the school's rules, the

intensity of the contact may range from step-by-step executions of single techniques with no contact whatsoever, to *jiyu kumite*, or “free sparring,” where students engage in full contact and may or may not wear protective padding.

Uniforms and Rankings:

The karategi (or simply “gi”) is the uniform established by Gichin Funakoshi for his students and is basically a lighter form of the judogi. The main difference between the karategi and the judogi is thickness. The karategi is generally only about half as thick as the judogi, but it is still made of a heavier canvas fabric than most clothing.

Karate’s ranking system was also developed by Funakoshi in 1924 for use in his Shotokan system. The system is derived from the rank system used by judo and uses a set of colors to represent each rank, which is called a *kyū*. The *kyū* count up from ten at the bottom to one at the top. Once a candidate has gone through to first *kyū*, he is then ready to advance to the various *dan* levels, represented by marks on a black belt. In most systems, the first six *dan* are awarded based upon proficiency, while the remaining four are given as honorary recognitions.

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:

Do I need to know Japanese to train in karate? Although a great deal of the vocabulary is in Japanese, there is no requirement for knowledge of it. Teachers typically instruct in the language native to the area.

How many different types of karate are there? Although there are dozens (perhaps hundreds) of different individual styles, there is generally agreed to be four main branches of modern karate: Shotokan, Shitō-ryū, Gōjū-ryū, and Wadō-ryū.

How many people practice karate? Although the number cannot be known with any precision, estimates range between 50 million and 100 million worldwide.

Organizations dedicated to the Style:

World Karate Federation - <http://www.wkf.net/> - largest karate governing body; recognized by the IOC

International Okinawan Goju-Ryu Karate-do Federation (IOGKF) - <http://www.iogkf.com/> - international governing body for Gōjū-ryū

World Shitō-ryū Karate-dō Federation - <http://www.karatedo.co.jp/shitokai/wskf/> - international governing body for Shitō-ryū following the lineage of Kenwa Mabuni's older son Kenei

Shitō-ryū International Karate-dō Kai – <http://www.seitoshitoryu.com/> - international governing body for Shitō-ryū following the lineage of Kenwa Mabuni's younger son Kenzō

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

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

Japan Karate-dō Federation Wadōkai - <http://www.karatedo.co.jp/wado> - international organization founded by Hironori Ōtsuka for the promotion of Wadō-ryū

International Federation of Wado-Ryu Karate-Do - <http://www.wado-ryu.jp/> - international organization for Wadō-ryū founded by Hironori Ōtsuka's second son, Jiro Ōtsuka

Wado International Karate-Do Federation - <http://www.wikf.com/> - third major international organization dedicated to Wadō-ryū founded by Hironori Ōtsuka's student Tatsuo Suzuki

IKO Kyokushinkaikan Sosai - <http://www.mas-oyama.com/> - international governing body for Kyokushin organized by Masutatsu Oyama's daughter Kurstina

IKO Kyokushinkaikan Matsui - <http://www.kyokushinkaikan.org/> - international governing body for Kyokushin organized by Masutatsu Oyama's student Shohei Matsui