



The Untraditional Traditionalist

Psychologists have debated it for decades: nature versus nurture. Is our DNA our destiny, or are we a product of our environment? The issue can hardly be settled here, but perhaps one piece of evidence is the experience of Kenneth Funakoshi. The surname sounds familiar certainly, causing any martial artist to ask, "Are you any relation to...?" In addition, the answer is yes, Kenneth Funakoshi is the fourth cousin of Gichin Funakoshi, widely known as the Founder of Modern Karate. You would think it obvious that Kenneth Funakoshi is a Shotokan stylist, but here is where coincidence—or something more—comes into play. For while there were some vague mentions in the Funakoshi household that a living relative had something to do with karate, it was hardly stressed as a legacy that had to be upheld. Kenneth Funakoshi got involved in the martial arts as a ten year old in Honolulu, but his first interest was in judo, and then in Kenpo at age seventeen. It was not until he was twenty-one and enlisted in the US Air Force when Shotokan master Hirokazu Kanazawa Sensei came to the area from Japan in 1960—that Funakoshi could take up the art that ran deep in his veins, and he never thought to mention the relationship to his instructor. His destiny? Funakoshi does not see it in such grand terms. In fact, many of Sensei Kenneth Funakoshi's ideas—about relaxing the ranking standards, studying other styles, black belts for children, and his conflicts with the Japan Karate Association—are somewhat untraditional, proving that Funakoshi is much more than his lineage.

Finding Shotokan

Funakoshi's grandfather came from Okinawa to Hawaii to work in the sugarcane fields in the early part of the century. When Funakoshi's father was one year old, his parents took him back to Okinawa, where he stayed for fifteen years and studied karate, but did not continue to train upon his return. Kenneth Funakoshi was born in 1938 in Honolulu and lived there most of his life, even recalling a Sunday drive at age three to his grandfather's sugarcane field next to Pearl Harbor. The car got a flat tire on the way, and "planes were flying very low, tipping their wings, looking at us," Funakoshi remembers. "A policeman came and said 'You'd better get off the street. This is the real thing; this is not a maneuver.' This was when Japan was bombing Pearl Harbor." Though retaining strong connections to their Japanese roots, the Funakoshi family did not stress Gichin Funakoshi's heritage. "My parents used to tell me about a relative who taught karate in Okinawa, but after World War II, judo was the popular sport," says Kenneth Funakoshi. "I trained in judo and Kenpo right through college. Any form of karate was unavailable. I took Shotokan when Kanazawa Sensei came over from JKA—just by coincidence. We thought karate was all the same. We didn't know there were Shotokan, Shito-Ryu, and Goju-Ryu." Noting that it is difficult to defend against multiple attackers with judo, Funakoshi found karate to be "a little more practical on the streets. I thought the Kenpo was not as scientific as the Shotokan. Many of the rough street fighter personalities took Kenpo. The first day, you just come in and punch as hard as you can and kiai as loud as you can. Physically I was strong. I played football, I swam in high school. However, when Kanazawa Sensei came over from Shotokan, I went to watch his classes every night for two weeks. There was something very, very gentle about him, humble. The Kenpo instructors were the macho type—rough people. New students were beaten up. Kanazawa Sensei's classes were not like that at all. There were a lot of kids, and all [types of] people. Therefore, my first impression of karate was of soft, easy training. I expected something more physical. However, I found out that Kanazawa Sensei was the karate champion-kata and kumite-so I came back another night. I was kind of curious." Impressed by the friendly greeting he got from Kanazawa Sensei, Funakoshi / / began as a white belt in ^ Shotokan. Though Funakoshi trained / under Kanazawa Sensei for / two and a half years, and then under JKA Senior Instructor Mastaka Mori, from 1963 to 1965, he never thought to mention his famous relative. It was not until his third Shotokan instructor, Tetsuhiko Asai Sensei, was invited to Funakoshi's mother's house for dinner, that the topic even came up. "She mentioned that we had a relative in Okinawa who taught karate," Funakoshi remembers." Asai Sensei said, 'Oh, what is his name?' She said, 'Gichin Funakoshi,' and Asai Sensei's jaw just dropped. He asked me, 'Why didn't you tell me that?' and I said, 'I didn't know it was important.' I didn't know that Shotokan was named after him." Nonetheless, Funakoshi sees it as "by chance" that he walked in Kanazawa Sensei's dojo. "I have never gone to Okinawa," he says. "I started taking Kenpo in 1956, one year before Gichin Funakoshi died. I just remember one day when Adriano Emperado came to class and said that somebody who founded karate had died in Japan. He never mentioned the name."

Eclectic Learning

Funakoshi still teaches judo and Kenpo, and says, "Knowing one style is good, but every style has its good points. I warn my students that to be a tournament champion does not really mean you can protect yourself on the streets. Karate is good as long as you are standing on your feet and at a certain distance. Once the judo man grabs hold of you, the karate man is dead. I tell my students that. Judo combined with karate is very hard to beat. "Kenpo stresses a lot of back fist strikes. Karate does a lot of reverse punches; these are good, but occasionally there is a need for the back fist strike, because if the opponent moves to the side while you're attacking, it is difficult to throw a straight jab or reverse punch, but the back fist is made for that side attack," Funakoshi comments. "In tournaments, if you attack first, you will score about eighty percent of the time, especially with the reverse punch. Then the jab is next. In Japan, because of the way the people are built, not too many points are scored by kicks. The Europeans have longer legs, longer arms. Between Japan and Europe, now the competition is getting very close. [That is why] at my tournaments, I have eight weight divisions. In Japan, I guess because when they started out, all Japanese were pretty much the same height, they only had one. When the Europeans start jumping in there, the height and the weight is too much. "I used to use kicks in my tournaments, especially the slide step in with the front leg and then an attack with a kick or punch. If I can remember right, in one tournament when I was younger, I won all my matches with only kicks. "The good thing about training with a maturing instructor like me is that you notice the body changes as you get older, and the techniques will have to change," says Funakoshi. "This is how I found out that using your hands is good for a long time as you get older, as a basis for exercise and self-defense, because goes is your people change from other styles with a lot of kicking, especially high kicking. When they reach their 30s, they come to me and say 'It's too rough for me to lift up my leg and kick high.' Shotokan is good because we do a lot of punching. We do kicks too. It all depends on the individual. "My personal opinion is that the kids should start off with judo, because you learn how to roll and fall, and grapple, and kids normally wrestle all the time anyway. I am glad I started that way and then went into kicking and punching with Kenpo and karate. We do not teach any weapons at all, but lot of people like weapons, especially the nunchaku that Bruce Lee made popular. Whatever people want. But from what I heard, karate and weapons were two different things."

JKA Struggles

After Asai Sensei left the JKA-Hawaii in 1969, the organization planned to assign someone from Hawaii to be the next chief instructor. Funakoshi, as the current competitive champion, was the logical choice, and headed the Karate Association of Hawaii, the JKA's Hawaii branch, for the next five years. Besides continuing the teaching of JKA techniques, Funakoshi held an annual tournament, remembering that "We trained hard all year for one tournament." The

winners advanced to H. Nishiyama Sensei's All-America Karate Federation Championship, usually held in Los Angeles, and the winners of that event competed in Japan. "We were reporting directly to Nishiyama Sensei," says Funakoshi. "So was everybody in the Western hemisphere. Politically we felt that we should go directly to JKA Japan headquarters. All the instructors who left Japan came to Hawaii for training and vacation, so we always had access to all the top instructors. Nishiyama Sensei used to come to Hawaii all the time to officiate at tournaments. We felt we were treated better by Japan than by Nishiyama Sensei." According to Funakoshi, Nishiyama wrote to the JKA in 1975 and cited a legal agreement stating that he had the territory to himself, and threatening to sue if the JKA's Japanese headquarters accepted Funakoshi directly. "So I sent a letter of resignation to Nishiyama Sensei," says Funakoshi. "He sent another letter to me about a week later saying that if I didn't cancel my resignation, he was going to kick me out. It's like telling your boss you're going to quit, and he says, 'If you don't stay with us I'm going to fire you.'" As his students began moving to the mainland, Funakoshi says, "Nishiyama would send his so-called spies or goons down there, and they were supposed to check back to him. My students said 'We need your help; what should we do now?' That was when I was negotiating whether to quit, so I said 'I'm independent now. Don't worry.'

"I was the first guy who broke away from JKA," says Funakoshi. "I felt we weren't being treated fairly. Every year someone from Hawaii would go to Nishiyama's tournament, and would come in second place every single year. They would sweep or punch in the final matches and not even get half a - - N point. That is not the main reason, just one. In karate, we seek perfection of character that means justice, to be fair in everything. That is the bad thing about tournaments. Certain instructors because of their rank and position win first place all the time. When I have my tournaments, I tell my officials to be fair. Call the shots as you see it."

Expansion

Once independent, Funakoshi began to expand his empire, flying to the mainland every two months to visit branches in Seattle, Washington; San Jose, California; and Los Angeles. He soon went south of the border, opening schools in the Mexican cities of Ensenada and Cabo San Lucas. Nine years ago, he tired of travelling from Hawaii so often and moved to San Jose. He now also heads dojo in Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Mazatlan, as well as in Europe and South America. So widespread are his schools that when asked how many schools and students are under his Karate Association of Hawaii, Funakoshi admits, "You know what? I don't know!" No wonder. The numbers will constantly change if Funakoshi has his wish. He has been visiting Poland every six months for the past three years, and notes, "I've got all the top members from Poland. Many of Kanazawa Sensei and Nishiyama's group have quit joining my organization. They have started to win tournaments. I feel sorry for the Polish people. They are very hard-working and hard-training people." Though he is quick to note that he is not placing blame, Funakoshi believes that "the reason they don't have a permanent Japanese instructor is because there's no money over there. The Japanese instructors go only to

the big cities where there is money. I understand it's a business."

Change for the better

"Other instructors and I get together and talk about the changes in karate and we just laugh," says Funakoshi. "As far as techniques, I think [those changes] are for the best. Through competition, you weed out the ineffective techniques. Many techniques that may look good in theory do not work on the street or in full contact. You can leave it in the kata just for tradition's sake." Funakoshi notes that open style and American karate are very popular "because of the American mentality. They like to have their own identity. Some of them have a hard time conforming to traditional movement or kata. They like their own kata with the music background—which is good; Americans have many good qualities. Like every country, they have good qualities and bad qualities, whereas in traditional karate you are going to do a kata the way it was taught. You don't modify." Figuring that "They may end up in my dojo," Funakoshi sees the positive side of anything that gets people into karate. "A place in Hawaii opened up and advertised 'Guaranteed black belt in ten months,'" Funakoshi recalls. "Well, people got their black belts, but then they realized it wasn't helping them on the streets, and a lot of them ended up in my dojo, happy to start over as white belts. I advertised, 'We do not guarantee a certificate of rank. It must be earned.' "Of course since I'm in a traditional area, I'd like to see traditional karate grow stronger. Traditional karate was the first to come over, and then American style karate began to grow. Now tae kwon do is very strong. The Koreans are very aggressive businesspeople, and they do a good job, maybe because they stick together. "Now, even in Japan, they claim there are two or three Shotokan JKAs, and they're suing each other," says Funakoshi. "According to the Japanese government, it's okay to have two people call them JKA, but according to the Ministry of Education, it should be only one. The problem is who has the lease rights to the JKA dojo? Because of the cost of real estate in Japan, that is worth millions of dollars. From what I heard, Asai Sensei won the court battle for the lease rights, and the rest of the JKA people moved out-across the street. It split the two into not-so-strong organizations. They are going to be beaten by the Europeans, because if one JKA goes to the world championships, it is really only half a team. They couldn't make it, so by mutual agreement, the one JKA joined back to the original. The two groups train on different nights now. These are rumors; I have not been there myself, but this is what I have heard. When I hear this stuff, I get depressed. We used to look at JKA as the model for Shotokan."

Relaxed Ranking

For traditional karate to grow, Funakoshi gives untraditional advice, encouraging more advertising, and a less-strict ranking system. "Traditional people are very proud that you must earn your black belt; it takes four or five years, whereas other styles promote you faster," he says. "My personal opinion is, as long as you teach good karate, strictly traditional, with repetition and perfection, there's nothing wrong with lowering the standards of karate [ranking]. To be honest, they

have been lowered. Mainly it is done for financial reasons, and I would not be afraid to admit it myself. Because if you start flunking half the people, like they did in the old days, you'll have a lot more people dropping out and quitting." Noting that the JKA requirement for branch schools dropped from sandan to shodan, Funakoshi says, "They were teaching mostly kids, so why not? Why would you need a sandan with a JKA teacher's certificate to teach kids? The market has changed. In Japan, before, kids could not take karate. There are more kids than adults now." Funakoshi sees "nothing wrong" with awarding black belts to children, and was among the first to start a children's program. "The first Saturday, about forty kids showed up with their parents," he recalls. "When I'd open a branch, within two months I'd have fifty to seventy-five kids. I realized the market was in the kids. As long as you supervise the kids correctly, it is okay. The instructors have to guide them in what karate is for. This is why you have to stress the character building more than fighting in tournaments. "I have a lot of kids start at five years old. By the time they're nine, they're ready for black belts," says Funakoshi, who awards children a black belt with a white stripe that is removed without further testing when the child reaches sixteen. "A lot of kids, being more flexible, can do the kata better than adults, but of course the adults are bigger and stronger. I tell them, 'What you see on TV is acting. What you learn here is more practical. I show them why; I show them the stances, the stability, the advantage. They can do it on their own if they want to do all those fancy kicks, but on the streets, I do not think it is going to work. I also stress that learning a technique or a kata can take only a few minutes, but to develop the internal muscles, the joints and the tendons to perfect these techniques and kata takes five, ten, fifteen, twenty years." In fact, Funakoshi began his children's program with his own firstborn in mind, and has passed down his Shotokan to his sons Kevin, thirty-four, who took over Funakoshi's Hawaii dojo, and Kyle, a twenty-two-year-old college student who teaches in San Jose. Funakoshi also has a daughter, Lara, who does not currently train. "My two best students are my sons," he says. I can see why in the old days, martial artists only taught their sons everything they knew, because they could be trusted. A lot of these things I'm learning through experience." Funakoshi did not mention their revered ancestor when the boys were very young, and says, "I think that as they get older, they'll realize [its significance] more and more, like I did." However, Funakoshi stresses that even if his surname were Smith, "I would be doing what I'm doing right now. I did not make a big thing out of it. Everybody else did. It might have helped me to expand and attract people's attention, but even without [that lineage] I still would be doing the same thing. The people that I meet are my closest friends. My whole life revolves around the dojo now." It is no wonder, then, that he was willing to uproot from Hawaii to San Jose. Asked about the transition, he says, "I did it for the sake of karate. I feel like Gichin Funakoshi. He had to move from Okinawa to Japan just to spread the art."