



KENNETH FUNAKOSHI TOUCHING BUDO

By Jose m. Fraguas

In 1960, Sensei Funakoshi started Karate training when the Japan Karate Association (JKA) assigned its first grand champion, Hirokazu Kanazawa, to teach at the Karate Association of Hawaii for three years. A young Ken Funakoshi trained under Masataka Mori, another senior instructor from the Japanese Karate Association. From 1966 to 1969, he trained under the third and last instructor sent by the JKA, the legendary Tetsuhiko Asai, another former grand champion from Japan. In 1969, after training 10 years under three of Japan's top instructors and winning the grand championship of the Karate Association of Hawaii for five years in a row (1964-1968), Sensei Kenneth Funakoshi was appointed as the Chief Instructor for the Karate Association of Hawaii. Sensei Funakoshi moved to San Jose, California to teach karate in December 1986, in 1987, the Funakoshi Shotokan Karate Association was founded.

How long have you been practicing the Martial Arts?

I have been practicing martial arts for 61 years: ten years Judo, three years Kempo, and 48 years in Karate. I began training Judo when I was 10 years old. After attending regular schools, some of the Japanese students went to Japanese language schools. I attended Fort Gakuen Japanese School. After Japanese school, I trained Judo under Arakaki Sensei. My Judo training has helped to make my Karate fighting stronger. At age 18, I trained under Master Emperado at the Palama Settlement dojo. When I was 22 years old, I started Shotokan under Sensei Kanazawa for three years, under Mori Sensei for three years, and Asai Sensei for four years. They were sent to Hawaii to teach by the Japan Karate Association.

Would you tell us some interesting stories of your early days in karate?

I taught Kempo at Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico when I was 21 years old. When I was stationed at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii, I started training under Kanazawa Sensei. When I first watched Kanazawa Sensei teaching karate, I was surprised because his classes were slow and easy. I thought the training was supposed to be rough, tough, and hard, like Kempo. I later learned that you do not treat your beginners like advanced students. The training became harder as you got higher in rank. The longer you trained, the more you saw the benefits of the JKA Shotokan system. When I first

trained under Kanazawa Sensei, during the one-step kumite practice, I blocked my opponent's punch and performed several punches, back fist strikes, threw my opponent down, and kicked him several times when he went down on the floor (this is the way we practiced in Kempo self-defense). Kanazawa Sensei said, "No, no! Self-defense on the street is more important than sport karate. Karate started for self-defense. Sport karate came much later. It you have to block and punch only one time." The reason for this type of defense was that you must have the confidence that you can disable your attacker with one punch in case there are multiple attackers. Kanazawa Sensei was a good example because he could knock out an attacker with one punch or kick, which he did on some occasions on the street and in closed-door challenges. On one occasion, when I had just removed the cast from my right hand (Kanazawa Sensei had broken it during kumite practice), I was driving home one night and I honked my horn at a guy who almost hit my car. He forced me to the side and pulled me out of my car. He was moving around and jabbing his hands like he was a boxer. I think he was showing off because he had two girls in his car. I punched him once in his mouth and, as he was falling to the ground, one kicked him in the head. Immediately he said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He was bleeding a lot from his mouth and I thought I had broken my right hand again, but it was okay. I still have some scars on my right knuckles 47 years later.

How has your personal expression in karate developed over the years and what is it that keeps you motivated after all these years?

When you are young, the most important thing is to improve your competition techniques. After a few years of competition, the goal of winning is not important. Your mind and body feel that there is more in karate than winning tournament. You start to remember what your parents and karate instructors were teaching about perfecting your character. When you become an instructor and parent, you feel the responsibility to help your students and children about the spiritual development as well as the physical development the younger generation needs all the spiritual development it can get. When I began to travel in Europe 20 years ago, the karate students did not know what the Dojo Kun was about. They thought karate was only a sport. I started to lecture about the Dojo Kun and the spiritual training of karate. Now, many of the countries request that I teach them about the spiritual part of karate training as well as the physical training. I teach a good portion about spiritual training in my seminars. The most important point is to emphasize spirit first, technique second, according to Master Gichin Funakoshi. I first explain about spirit, respect, and etiquette; then about punches and kicks.

When teaching the art of karate, what is the most important element: self-defense or sport?

The single most important element in karate, whether it is sport or self-defense, is spirit. Without spirit, you have nothing. A long time ago when there were no tournament competitions, more time was spent in Kata and Bunkai. The katas are based on defending and counterattacking techniques. How that tournament competition is popular, the emphases are on attacking to score points rather than defending and counter punching. Self-defense on the street is more important than sport karate. Karate started self-defense. Sport karate came much later. It would not be proper for a tournament champion not to be able to defend himself on the streets. On the street, it is your spirit that will save your life, not your tournament record or medals. Two of my high school friends were hospitalized from knife wounds in street fights. One of my Ken instructors was killed in a bar fight by a knife attack. These incidents happened during the late 1950s when people did not carry guns.

On the street, I had fought an attacker with a knife and was confronted by a person holding a hammer. I also had one-on-one fights and two gang fights, coincidentally with football team members. The gang fights really made me realize later how important spirit is in real fighting, like in the street, where there are no rules.

Whom would you like to have trained with that you have not?

I trained with two of the world's best Shotokan instructors, Kanazawa Sensei and Asai Sensei. I trained for three years under Mori Sensei, another senior sensei from the Japan Karate Association. I also trained with Sensei's Nakayama, Kase, Enoeda, and Shirai, etc. I would have wanted to train under my fourth cousin, Master Gichin Funakoshi, but when he died in 1957, I was only 18 years old and training Kempo.

How important is competition in the evolution of a karate practitioner?

Competition is important because it tests your progress in the fighting category, but the real test is in the streets, where there are no rules. I know because I had many altercations in the streets growing up in Hawaii. The experiences fighting in the streets have made me understand the meaning of spirit. This has been my basis for teaching fighting.

Is there anything lacking in the way Martial Arts are taught today in comparison to how they were when you started training?

I would be the first to admit that the teaching has changed to accommodate the new generation of karate practitioners. Some students want to train once or twice a week for only two months. The average students train for about two to four months and start to lose interest because repetition is boring. They do not realize that repetition is the secret to good karate techniques. Repetition develops patience and perfection. When I was training, we did the same techniques and kata over and over again. We never questioned why; we just did it.

Do you feel that you still have further to go in your studies?

You never stop learning. Generally, you learn in three phases. The first phase is the physical phase, in which you are young and train to improve your techniques for better punches, kicks, kata, kumite, competition, etc. The second phase is the mental phase, when you are older and you start to teach. You become smarter and wiser because of your experience teaching people, knowing them, their different ages, sizes, minds, etc. The third phase is the spiritual phase, because of your experience in karate and life. This is when you are much older and have learned to add different teachings and techniques along the way. I learn something new about life, culture and karate every time I go to a different country to teach.

Have there been times when you felt fear in your training?

Again, I must stress the importance of spirit in karate training. If you have the proper training, you never will be afraid while training or while competing because everything is supervised and controlled. Of course, accidents will happen. There should be a little fear while fighting in the streets because there are no rules.

What are your thoughts about doing thousands of repetitions of one single technique in training, as in the old days?

Repetition is the secret to success for traditional karate. However, many stories about thousands of punches and kicks are exaggerated. Every January for the past 15 years at my main dojo, we have training called the "Month of 2,000 Punches." During the first week of training, we punch 250 left and right punches. During the second week, we do 500 punches from each side. The third week, we do 750 punches from each side. The fourth week, we do 1,000 punches from each side. It takes one hour to do the "Night of 2,000 Punches." Of course, these punches are done in a relaxed, snapping manner. Doing only 100 kicks from each side is difficult. I remind my students that it is physically hard to do the "Night of 2,000 Punches," but it is more spirit training because when the body gets tired and wants to give up, the spirit pushes the mind to continue. Repetition teaches you to relax and use only

the necessary muscles to do an efficient technique. Using too many unnecessary muscles only slows your movements. Speed is more important than power.

What is your opinion of the direction that JKA took after the death of Nakayama Sensei? How do you think these splits have affected the Shotokan style of Karate around the world?

JKA is a large established karate organization, so it will continue no matter who leaves. Whenever the head instructor dies, some of the remaining senior senseis will leave. In the JKA, the three most senior sensei's - Nishiyama, Okazaki, and Kase - were established outside of Japan. I think it would have been difficult for any of them to move back to Japan. My two senseis, Kanazawa and Asai, already had left JKA because of political problems. In my opinion, after Kanazawa Sensei left the JKA, Asai Sensei should have been appointed as Chief Instructor, but older sensei's thought Asai Sensei was too young. I think Kanazawa and Asai Sensei both had the technical abilities, personality, and tournament reputation to be the Chief Instructor of JKA. Unfortunately, politics are very involved in Karate these days and politics is the worst things that can happen to the art. At the upper level of the Associations and Federations, there are interests and political attitudes than prevent students at the lower level from competing and participating with other groups, and this puts a lot of restrictions on what they can and can't do.

We know loyalty is an important aspect in your teachings; how does this principle affect the character of the practitioner?

Loyalty in the Samurai Class was the most important element to his Lord (Shogun), because life or death for his Lord was his responsibility. This element "To Be Faithful" is handed down in the Dojo Kun. This also is practiced in the daily lives of the Japanese. This is the reason the Japanese are loyal to their employer forever. Loyalty in the Martial Arts still should be practiced today. If a student is loyal and stays with his sensei for a long time, he can be trusted over new students. Nowadays, you have high-ranking students or instructors transferring to other organizations. You do not know if they can be trusted or awarded higher ranks. They may leave your organization soon after they receive their promotion from you. We learn this from experience. I think that this lack of loyalty is more widespread now because we have succeeded in teaching the techniques of Karate but obviously, we have failed to emphasize enough the values of "Seeking Perfection of Character" and "Being Faithful". The importance of Dojo Kun is not explained enough these days and people do not understand how valuable these principles are for our lives. Two of my most proven, loyal, and best competitors and instructors are my two sons. I can see why in the past other sensei's have handed dojos to their sons. They can be trusted. I have experienced situations in which some of my high-ranked instructors seemed to be loyal but planned to open their own dojos without my knowledge. In this day and age where loyalty does not mean much, you just go on with your life. In the Samurai Age, this would have been dealt with differently.

Etiquette is a very important element in Budo; how does this affect the arts of Budo?

There are three elements that form what a Karate dojo is about: etiquette, respect, and courtesy. You erase one of these principles and there is no dojo anymore. Etiquette in the dojo comes from the respect for rank. Karate dojo is based on rank and the etiquette is respect for rank. These three elements are very important in developing the spiritual aspect of Karate, and the lack of teachings from instructors to students is one of the biggest problems that I see in the art of Karate around the world.

Then, do you think that spirituality can be taught through Karate training?

Yes, it can, but the dojo should not be the place where this spiritual training must start. The spiritual training of any child must start with the parents at home. What we see today is that parents fail in

teaching any spirituality to their children and then pass this "responsibility" to the schoolteachers. School is the place to learn academic issues, not spiritual matters. The spiritual aspects are supposed to be taught at home, and enforced at school and at the dojo. The result is that we see parents expecting the Karate teacher do all the disciplining and teaching that they do not do at home.

What can karate offer to the individual in these troubled times we are living in?

Whatever the problem an individual may have, karate training can have many benefits. After a rigorous workout, it can make your body relax. You forget the stress of your work or problems. You can sleep better and wake up the next morning refreshed. It can develop your spirit to never give up. Your health also will improve. You can be among friends whenever you go to the dojo. You can discuss problems with your sensei and other senpais. Many students have told me that karate training was the main reason that they got through a crisis. If you practice the Dojo Kun to be a better person, you have peace of mind knowing that you are an honest and humble person. You have peace and harmony within yourself. Wisdom is when you know others. Enlightenment is when you know yourself.

After so many years of training in Shotokan, what is so appealing for you in this style of karate, and why?

When I began training Shotokan almost 50 years ago, I didn't know if there were different styles or the size and history of the Japanese Karate Association. I only had to compare it with my training and exposure to Kempo in Hawaii. I realized that to be a karate-ka, you don't have to be macho and strong outwardly. In Shotokan, you learn to develop your character, to be humble and courteous. You don't have to be a naturally gifted athlete. Anyone can develop and improve his or her techniques. The JKA had a good system of training, examinations, tournaments, and organizational structure. I learned that by coincidence my cousin, Gichin Funakoshi, was the founder of the Japanese Karate Association. My parents used to talk about Gichin Funakoshi but I didn't know he was connected to the JKA or Shotokan.

Americans generally are physically bigger than Japanese; how do you think this has affected their karate?

Americans are bigger than the Japanese, but the Europeans are bigger than the Americans, The Russians are bigger than the Europeans and they train the hardest. Size does have its advantages in kumite but not in kata. In Japan, kumite competition does not have any weight categories like we do. So, everybody is in the same division. Boxing, Wrestling, and Judo (even in Japan) have different weight categories. The Japanese do not concentrate on size or strength. They emphasize speed, distancing, and timing. Even though the Americans are bigger than the Japanese, the Japanese competitors still do well against bigger opponents. There should be weight categories.

What advice would you give to an instructor who is struggling with his or her own development?

Before becoming a sensei with one's own dojo, you must have trained and assisted under a qualified sensei for a long time. Even after you were given permission to be an instructor, you still must train at the main dojo and be supervised how to teach by your sensei. Too many young karate-ka are too inexperienced and not qualified to teach properly independently. Some recreational centers offer only introductory classes to children and beginners so you do not need a high-ranking sensei. I understand this kind of situation. If you feel that you need more development, see a qualified sensei.

Which teachers influenced you the most?

All three of my Shotokan sensei's influenced me at different times of my training. I was a white belt

when I first saw Kanazawa Sensei. He was currently the Kata and Kumite Champion for several years from the JKA, so we were all impressed with his strong and beautiful techniques. He emphasized big windups and kime. He broke one of my knuckles during kumite when I was a brown belt. Kanazawa Sensei had a nice personality and everyone liked him. In 1963, I attended the JKA Championships in Fukuoka, Japan. Kanazawa Sensei picked me up at the train station. During the tournament, Enoeda Sensei broke the neck of another tournament favorite, Nakaya Sensei, who still is paralyzed today from the neck down. Sensei Enoeda threw Sensei Nakaya to the floor while competing in the semi-final matches. I was a young shodan at that time, so I sat in the back of the hospital meeting room while the senior JKA officials and sensei's headed by Nakayama Sensei changed the kumite rules to eliminate the throwing techniques. After the tournament, Kanazawa Sensei gave me a memorable tour of Japan, visited Mori Sensei's wife (Mori Sensei was in Hawaii at the time), all the tourist places, etc. As busy as he was, Kanazawa Sensei still made the time to take care of me. I still have good memories of him. My second sensei was Masataka Mori. He was a strict disciplinarian and he insisted on long and low basic stances. Some students didn't understand him because he was strict, serious, and didn't smile in the dojo. I knew him as a fine person because I taught him English every Saturday morning and he treated me to a beef teriyaki lunch afterwards. I received my "Nidan" from Mori Sensei. Asai Sensei was my third instructor. He introduced us to his advanced techniques that nobody taught. He amazed everyone with his speed and techniques that nobody could do. His feats were legendary even when he was competing in Japan. He stressed speed, timing, and body shifting. I learned not only speed by practicing kumite with Asai Sensei, but also the importance of accuracy. I also learned a lot from Asai Sensei because I was a sandan at that time. In 1984, when I visited Japan, Asai Sensei, his wife (Keiko) and his daughter (Hoshimi), picked me up at the airport. I spent two weeks at his home and he treated me like royalty. I was his student but he did not let me spend even one yen while I was there as his guest. We trained at 6:30 in the morning in his backyard before his wife prepared our breakfast. We went to train again at the Instructor's class at the JKA-Main Dojo. This training schedule continued for two weeks and we reviewed the changes or back to basics katas that I incorporated in my kata and bunkai videos when I returned to Hawaii. Asai Sensei was the Chief Instructor for the Instructor's Class at the JKA Main Dojo. Asai Sensei's wife is originally from Taiwan and her family has a long history of Gigong and Kung Fu experience. Her brother was a Kung Fu Master and he trained with Asai Sensei to exchange their techniques and ideas. Unfortunately, Asai Sensei passed away in 2006. I had not seen Asai Sensei and his family for more than 22 years so I attended his funeral with my two sons. Mrs. Asai visited me in California the following year. We still keep in touch and write or talk on the phone. She is a remarkable and talented woman. Sensei Masatoshi Nakayama, Chief Instructor of the JKA, also had some influence on me because he was a few of the remaining sensei's who trained under Master Gichin Funakoshi. He developed the Japan Karate Association to the worldwide organization that it is today. He also continued Gichin Funakoshi's teaching of perfecting your character through karate training. He awarded me a "Godan" at the JKA Main Dojo. Most students only see their sensei's at the dojo during training sessions. I was fortunate to spend a lot of time with my sensei's in their homes, traveling with their families, and having long conversations after dinners. It is important to see them in normal situations at home and seeing them as a husband and father as well as a sensei in the dojo. I always talk about my experiences with my sensei's to my students. I also want my students to know me as a person outside the dojo but still maintain the student-instructor relationship and respect.

What are the real technical differences between the Shotokan method and any other karate styles?

Nowadays, kumite methods are the same because of the requirements in scoring techniques in tournaments. The biggest differences would be in kata, because of Shotokan's long and low stances in the kihon and kata. I would say that it is suited for conditioning the body for fighting. My FSKA organization style of kata is the same as JKA but the footwork in advanced kihon and kumite is different. We stress a lot of footwork in attacking. You must train in my seminars to understand what I am talking about. I have not trained in other karate styles so I cannot criticize or elaborate about them. We must respect all other styles of karate and martial arts. That is my teachings.

Do you practice any other art in conjunction with karate?

No, I am too preoccupied with teaching and researching Shotokan karate. I find myself spending more time behind the desk than teaching on the dojo floor. I spend more time writing and answering e-mails and writing articles for magazines. I have been requested many times to write a book on karate techniques. If I should write a book, it will be about my training, teaching, travels, and experiences in life. It will not be about winning tournaments

Where do you see your Organization going in the future?

My organization, Funakoshi Shotokan Karate Association (FSKA), is growing steadily every year. There are many karate organizations that need training and guidance from a parent organization like mine. There also are many organizations and instructors that want to get away from political problems with their dojos. I stress a non-political organization because all affiliated dojos report directly to me. There is no one person who is the country or district representative of FSKA. My affiliates can write or phone me directly at home, if they want to talk to me.

Finally, what advice would you like to give to all Karate practitioners?

First, find a qualified sensei. Second, stay out of politics and just train as hard and as often as you can. Third, practice the Dojo Kun to perfect your character.