

唐手

to/kara

de/te

The Origin of “Kara-te”

Empty-hand fighting is a tradition in Okinawa which owes much to the fighting styles of ancient China. The art introduced to Japan in the 1920’s as *karate* was known for centuries in Okinawa simply as *te* (= “hand,” to indicate fighting with empty hands as opposed to the use of hand-held weapons), and somewhat later as *to te* or *tode*, the *to* referring to the Tang dynasty of China (618-907 A.D.), i.e. “Tang hand” fighting.

During the Tang dynasty the martial arts of the Shaolin Buddhist temple, later to become a great influence on Okinawan karate, reached a high level of development; and it was also at this time that the philosophy of Zen Buddhism reached its highest level. Consequently, some authorities believe that a more philosophical rendering than “China hand” or “Tang hand” is appropriate, such as “meditative hand.”

Most of the written characters, or *kanji*, in the Japanese alphabet were borrowed from the Chinese language but were given Japanese names or pronunciations; thus a given character often has two possible “readings,” the Chinese name and the Japanese name. In this case, the character for “Tang” was read as “to” in Chinese and “kara” in Japanese.

Around 1875 the reading *karate* replaced *tode* as the name for the Okinawan fighting art, even though the characters used to indicate it remained unchanged.

空手

kara (empty)

te

In 1905, Chomo Hanashiro wrote a book in which he broke with tradition by changing the first character (*to* or *kara*) to an entirely different character which was also pronounced *kara*. This new character meant “empty,” thus changing *karate* from “Chinese hand” fighting to “empty-hand” fighting. This proposal did not immediately catch on with the Okinawan martial arts community. But in 1922 when Gichin Funakoshi moved to Japan to introduce karate there, he adopted Hanashiro’s spelling, a

change which has spread widely since then, and was officially accepted in Okinawa in 1936.

Funakoshi had historical and sociological motivations for the change. But in a more philosophical sense reflecting Zen concepts he recommended the notion of emptiness as implying more than just a hand holding no weapon. He wrote:

Just as an empty valley can carry a resounding voice, so must the person who follows the Way of karate make himself void or empty by ridding himself of all self-centeredness and greed. Make yourself empty within, but upright without. This is the real meaning of the "empty" in karate. [In this sense] karate explicitly states the basis of all the martial arts. Form equals emptiness; emptiness equals form.

Japan's greatest swordsman, Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645), had written earlier on this same Zen/martial arts concept, describing *emptiness* or *void* as the highest principle of sword-fighting and spiritual development. To Musashi, the Way was the void, and the void was the Way. The void was considered the source of all virtue, good and wisdom, where no evil could exist. Thus a more philosophical translation of *karate* might be "void hand," or "the skill that comes from the void," or "the man that is empty of all evil."

Although this change seems trivial, it caused a storm of controversy in Okinawa and Japan, involving deep-seated cultural-identity and sociopolitical issues. Nevertheless, Funakoshi's establishment of karate as a *do*, or Way, with deeper meaning than mere fighting technique, was a philosophical turning point which made possible the assimilation of karate into the traditional Japanese martial arts.

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