

# What is Karate?

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**Excerpts from  
Pinnacle of Karate**

Karate is a philosophy of life as well as the ultimate system of unarmed self-defense. Literally, "kara-te" means "empty hands", or hands without a weapon. As a method of self-defense, Karate specializes in striking blows, such as kicking, punching, chopping, slashing, clawing, stabbing and gouging techniques. It also includes a number of locking, choking and throwing techniques which are used in special cases, where to throw or lock the opponent is more practical than to strike.

The historical roots of karate can be traced back to the Buddhist monks of Sil Lum (Shorinji) monastery in China. Taishi Daruma (Bodhi Dharma or Dot Mor), a Chinese Indian abbot, crossed the Himalayas from India to China on foot (ca. 500 A.D.) to enlighten the monks at Shorinji Temple and teach them the way of Zen. Daruma found the Chinese monks lacking in physical and mental development and unable to endure the severity of the discipline required to bring them to Satori or enlightenment. In addition, they were often helpless victims of the bandits of the area. To remedy such matters, Daruma incorporated a physical fitness program based on exercise and self-defense movements in his system based on the Buddhist doctrine of the inseparability of mind and body, with the purpose of strengthening them to endure the rigors of his discipline. The success of his program was so complete that in a few years the monks had earned the reputation of being the most formidable fighters in China. The Shorinji-ryu system of defense became the foundation of Chinese kempo or tode, which soon spread throughout China, undergoing various changes and mutations, and then passed to Korea and Okinawa, and from there to Japan and the rest of the world (during the present century).

One of the most important chapters in the history of Karate, and the direct link to present-day Karate, was its development in Okinawa. In 1477 the Sho dynasty consolidated its civil administration with the prohibition and confiscation of all arms, leading to an increased interest in fighting with hands, feet, and farming implements and self-made weapons. Fresh impetus was given to this inclination when the Chinese replaced their civil emissaries with military personnel, some of whom were in Chinese kempo (Tode). This ancient art was well received by the Okinawans and absorbed into the native system of unarmed self-defense, and became known as Okinawa-te. (Sometimes referred to as Bushi-no-te).

Further interest was fanned in Okinawa-te when a Kyushu lord terminated the Sho Dynasty with the capture of Okinawa and a fresh prohibition against weapons. It is not clear whether this was brought about by the Satsuma clan or the Shimazu Clan, since the sources consulted on this point are in conflict.

Okinawa-te advanced tremendously as a result of such oppressive measures. From this rose the styles of Shuri-te, Naha-te, Tomari-te, Bushi-te and Shaolin-te, among other. Due to the fear of civil authority it was necessary to teach the Okinawan systems with the utmost secrecy and they were not to come out into the open again until 1900. Such Okinawan systems developed the present-day styles of Yoshi-kan (shotokan). Shorin-ryu, (Suidi, Matsumura, Matsubayahi, Kobayashi, Ryukyu, Shorin-ji and Chubu Branches), Shoren-ryu, Goju-ryu, Isshin-ryu, Wado-ryu Chito-ryu, Shito-ryu, Uechi-ryu, Motobu-ryu, Kyokoshin-ryu, Shuri-ryu, Kushin-ryu, Kojo-ryu, Ryuei-ryu, Itose-ryu and Ishimine-ryu, etc.

Modern Karate as we know it today is of relatively recent origin and was systematized from elements of Chinese, Korean and Okinawan forms. In 1901 Master Ankoh Itosu (who was a student of Sokon Matsumura and teacher of Masters Motobu and Funakoshi) broke with the tradition of secrecy by teaching Karate as part of the regular curriculum in the Okinawan Normal School. This action, followed by Motobu's work in Okinawa and Funakoshi's work in Japan, did much to speed the dissemination of modern Karate knowledge throughout the world.

Although the development of the science of Karate over the centuries has been long and arduous, and even in danger of being lost to mankind by suppression or indifference, it has nevertheless persisted due to the devotion of its many students and masters, often in the face of great hardships.

Karate, which clearly surpasses all the other martial art, must be considered in its final form and spirit as an expression of Man's indomitable will to survive adversity in the most direct and self-reliant manner possible, requiring only that which nature gave him - a mind and body rigorously disciplined as an inseparable entity.