



Episode 331 – Gichin Funakoshi | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello everyone thanks for coming by. this is whistlekickmartialartsradio episode 331. today, were talking all about Funakoshi, Gichin Funakoshi. My name is Jeremy Lesniak, I'm your founder here whistlekick, I'm your host on the show, I love martial arts so I made it my life and my job and its great, it's a great time. I get to talk to all of you, I get to spend pretty much from sunup to sundown working on this amazing project that is whistlekick. you can find everything we've got going on at whistlekick.com you can find us on social media were @whistlekick and of course you can find us here on the show which is all over the place, it's in podcast feeds, it's in whistlekickmartialartsradio.com, it's on YouTube, there's a lot going on. we been doing a lot of these profile episodes lately because it gives you and gives me context for what's going on as we talk about these people, these places, these occurrences in the history of martial arts of course the name Gichin Funakoshi, has come up quite a few times on the show so let's learn more about him.

Gichin Funakoshi is often called the father of modern karate particularly of Shotokan Karatedo. He's one of the most renowned figures in martial arts for spreading the practice of karate to the Japanese mainland from Okinawa in 1922. Funakoshi was a student of karate master's Anko Itosu we just talked about a few weeks ago and Anko Isato. he became a karate teacher at many universities in Japan and he became the emeritus chief instructor of the Japan karate Association at the age of 80. Funakoshi was born on November 10, 1868 in the district of Yamakawa-Sho, Shuri Okinawa the same year when the Meiji restoration occurred. he was born prematurely and was often sick. because of his frail body you



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receive the utmost care from his parents and grandparents as a thought he wouldn't live long. Funakoshi lived with his mother's parents during his childhood his grandfather taught him the four books and five classics of Confucianism as part of the knowledge requirements for the Shizoku or the privileged class. when he attended primary school he became close friends with one of his classmates whose father was as Azato Yosutsuni I also known as Anko Asato. Asato as Funakoshi described him was quote one of Okinawa's greatest experts in the art of karate. in fact Azato was not only an expert in karate but in other disciplines as well such as kendo, archery and horsemanship. Funakoshi believed that he was very lucky to know and be known by Asato. Funakoshi eventually learned karate from Azato through secret training sessions because karate practice was banned by the government at that time. apparently, students were strictly advised to keep hush about it. given the situation Funakoshi's training sessions with Azato were only done at night and only in his Azato's house. he was still living with his grandparents back then Asato's house was pretty far away however, he didn't mind the distance and patiently walk during the night just to learn karate from Asato. because of the regular long walks that he had he noticed that his health improved greatly. he was no longer sickly as he was before. Funakoshi enjoyed karate but more than this he felt indebted to the art because it improved his entire well-being. at that time, he decided to make karate a way of life. Funakoshi falsified his birth records by changing the year to 1870 to meet the requirements set by the Tokyo medical school as only those who were born after 1870 were eligible to take the entrance examination. he passed that entrance exam but he didn't pursue studying the school because of the topknot controversy in the Meiji era. the government abolished the topknot which was an ancient Japanese hairstyle that symbolized manhood. this caused a huge uproar to the Okinawans and Funakoshi strongly opposes change himself. as the Tokyo medical school refuse to accept students who wanted to retain the topknot, Funakoshi looked for alternatives. he decided to be a schoolteacher using his knowledge in the Chinese classics however, the topknot hairstyle was still a hindrance form at this time he decided to cut it off. he felt it was inevitable because of the massive changes that were occurring everywhere in Japan. he also thought that it was obligatory for him as a teacher to mold the younger generation in order to make his nation better in the future. in 1888 he handled the classroom for the first time, he was 21 years old. Funakoshi was anxious thinking about what his family would say when they saw he'd cut off his topknot. when he went home his father was furious while his mother was even more so. so furious that she left the house and fled to her parents' home despite his parents outright rejection he continued in his profession for the next 30 years. during this time he was teaching Funakoshi didn't leave karate behind, he taught during the day practice karate during the night his Master Azato's of his house. his neighbors were bewildered as to where he was going at all hours of the night. They even thought he was secretly going to a brothel. Funakoshi practiced every single night in the backyard of Azato's house. determined to master his master's teachings he would practice a single kata from months. he would not stop the exhausting training until Azato became satisfied. Azato is clearly stern in the way that he taught Funakoshi even if Azato was already old the highest praise Funakoshi received from Azato after showing him a kata was, good. I think some of us had instructors like that. In the morning after the training sessions Azato would become a different kind of teacher according to Funakoshi. Azato would discussed the essence of karate



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and asked him about his work just like a parent asking his child after this Funakoshi would walk home while being attentive to his skeptical neighbors. Funakoshi not only learn karate from Azato but also from a close friend of Azato, whose name was Anko Itosu. Itosu was a great karate master himself and Funakoshi learned a lot from the discussions both masters. Funakoshi cannot appreciate these two masters more as a mold different Koshi to what he had become there were a lot of misconceptions about karate to Foucault she wanted to clear up, he took the nukite or the spear hand technique as an example. he once heard someone who claimed to be an authority in karate say that the nukite could be used to tear off the ribs of one's opponent using only the five fingers of one hand. it was said that through constant training to the hands the hands would be reshaped horrifically and be stronger. the training of all thrusting ones handed to a cask full of beans and sand, pebbles and lastly pellets of lead. another example was the superhuman grip that could tear off a man's flesh, according to those who claimed it was true when she trained lifting two heavy buckets using only the fingertips and swing them around, they claim that once maximum strength of one's grip was rich flesh to be ripped off easily from a man's body. Funakoshi recalled his master Itosu who crushing a thick bamboo stem with his bare hand while this was an extraordinary feat Funakoshi believes that he told his strength was a gift and not attained through torturous training though it was indeed in enhanced through physical training he also believes that a man could certainly attain external feats of strength but he could only reach a certain level and no farther as he knew that there was a limit to enhancing one's physical strength. Funakoshi criticizes the so-called nonsense techniques because the true definition of karate was obscured by these baseless claims. the people who exaggerated the martial art would convince others that karate was something to be frightened of. moreover, these claims didn't have anything to do with karate at all but were really only about mere strength which could be acquired to practice which any man could do regardless of martial arts.

there were four types of primary school instructors when Funakoshi began his teaching career. those taught elementary classes, those taught higher grades, special courses and those who served as assistants. Funakoshi started as an assistant but that was only for a short time he pass examination for him to qualify as an instructor for elementary class. afterwards he was promoted I was transferred to Naha which gave him more time to practice karate. after some time, he was promoted again to teaching higher grades since he was a graduate of the teachers training college he realized that further promotion would be slow. the principle of school recommended him to be promoted to a higher post but he declined it. that promotion would've forced him to travel to remote places which would have made him Far, quite far from his karate Masters. in fact his stay at Naha and was permitted by his superiors for a reason. it's because the topknot controversy. the government's mandate of banning the topknot was not observed in Okinawa in any way whatsoever. for Funakoshi it was a trivial matter but that was not the case with the Ministry of education. the ministry ordered that all students should be shaved of their topknot or else the students would not be allowed to enter school. the scissors wielding teachers cannot do anything as many of the students knew karate. that's the reason why Funakoshi who was known to be quite skilled with karate at that time was asked to handle the students. being more



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skilled in the students the students were helpless and finally submitted themselves to the shears. Funakoshi continued to train karate and had more masters other than Azato and Itsudo. He had Master Kiyuna, Master Tuno, Master nigaki, Master Matsamura who were all known experts. despite having many masters, Funakoshi she still spent most of his time with his two original masters as you learn not only karate from them but other things including politics from Azato. originally the kata in karate meant Chinese but there's also another quite different character with the same pronunciation that meant empty therefore, one could interpret it as Chinese hands or empty hands. in the 1920s in Tokyo, Chinese was preferred instead of the other definition but it wasn't necessarily correct according to Funakoshi. he thought that since Okinawa was under Chinese influence for such a long time and that the imported goods from China were usually of excellent quality, the Okinawans became more inclined to use Chinese instead of empty. as a result the general population thought the karate was a form of Chinese boxing. one would quickly notice the difference between the Chinese style boxing and karate so karate according to Funakoshi was not in any way acquired from the Chinese. Funakoshi had the chance to express the sentiment in Keio University at a karate research group. he suggested that karate should be renamed die Nippon Kempo Karatedo or great Japan fist method empty hands way. as expected he received large criticism not only Japan but from Okinawa but he stood by his change. eventually people acknowledged it. according to Funakoshi, the word empty was more appropriate rather than Chinese as the martial art obviously uses no weapons. more than this the objective of karatedo students is to empty their heart and mind of all earthly desire and vanity which is also in line with Buddhist scripture. in 1921 the Okinawa Prefecture was one of the invited participants for an ancient Japanese martial arts demonstration it was held in the women's higher normal school in Tokyo. Funakoshi was invited by the Department of Education to introduce karate on behalf of all Okinawans. of course Funakoshi agreed instantly. Funakoshi was planning to return to Okinawa after the demonstration, he was approached by one of the greatest martial arts masters Kano Jigorom the founder of Judo. he was asked by Kano for a brief lecture about the art of karate. at first Funakoshi was hesitant as he felt his knowledge wasn't sufficient to teach such a great master but Kano persisted. Funakoshi agreed to demonstrate some kata for Kano in the kotokan Judo Hall. Funakoshi thought that only a few people would come to watch but to his astonishment there were more than 100 people waiting for him when he arrived. after the demonstration Kano asked him how long it would take a person to master the kata he had just demonstration. Funakoshi told him that it would take at least a year, Kano said that was far too long so he asked Funakoshi to teach him only the basic ones. Funakoshi agreed right away feeling honored with Cano's request. one morning after Funakoshi memorable encounter with Kano, he was called upon by a painter named Hoan Kosugi. Kosugi asked him to remain in Tokyo for some more time to teach him and his group the Tabata Poplar club. after several sessions Funakoshi realized that if you want to karate to proliferate all over Japan, he was the man to start that Tokyo is a good place to begin.

He wrote a letter to his masters Azato and Itsu about his plan and they both agree and even encouraged him, but also left him a warning that would be a very difficult job. the warning from his masters proved to be more than right as Funakoshi experience life harder far harder then he



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experienced in Okinawa. he started by moving into a student dormitory named Mesijuku where he rented a tiny room. he got permission to use the lecture hall as a temporary dojo during the times when it wasn't in use. while the place seemed to be fine the problem was money, he had no money and his family couldn't send him any either. he couldn't attract sponsors because karate was still unknown. thus Funakoshi needed a plan to earn money to support himself, he took all sorts of odd jobs at the dormitory since being a watchman, a caretaker, a gardener and even swept rooms. he had students but just a few and the fees weren't enough even for his monthly food bill. he convinced the dormitory cook to take karate lessons and in exchange the cook would give him a discount on the food. it was without a doubt a difficult life for Funakoshi. one day because she thought maybe he would pawn something but he realized he had nothing valuable to pawn. he found an old hat and a handwoven kimono from Okinawa and he decided to pawn them. so he packed them up carefully and went to a distant pawnshop because he didn't want his students to know. upon arriving at the pawnshop he handed the items to the clerk it was a shame because he thought they were of little maybe even no value. the clerk took the items and brought them to the back room. Funakoshi heard conversations and whispers after a while the clerk reappeared to his surprise, Funakoshi was handed a huge sum of money. he later learned that the clerk's younger brother the voice that the clerk was talking to in the back room was a former karate student of Funakoshi's. Funakoshi was very grateful to his benefactors including Hoan Kosugi the other painters in the Tabata poplar club. because of these good people, he now had money and he was able to continue spreading the word of karate in Japan. Funakoshi's situation improved eventually when the number of students grew. many of them were white-collar workers who came to his dojo after a day's work luckily for him his students loved the art and were enthusiastic in perfecting their skills. the knowledge of karate had spread to many people in just a short time, even some of the professors and students from Keio University came to think of his dojo to learn karate. eventually a karate study group is formed in the University the first of its kind. so aside from his responsibilities in the dojo he was also working in the University serving as an instructor. not for long though as another University named Takushoku, Shoko came to seek his service in teaching karate there. one day, a wealthy looking man came with Funakoshi's dormitory together with the young man in a student uniform. he was requested to perform a karate demonstration and the young man immediately expressed his interest in learning the art. he later learned that the man was Kichinosuke Saigō who later became a member of the House of Representatives after the second world war. studying at the peer school at that time the young man rented in TOgukan lodging house which was near for the coaches dojo and far from the school I have concern Funakoshi told the owner of the lodging house that one of his tenants was an aristocrat so the owner immediately decided to move the young man to a better lodging house. this young man studied under Funakoshi for several years and went to his dojo every day. the number of schools and universities that sought Funakoshi's instruction grew, among them was with Waseda wasei Nippon medical College, Tokyo Imperial University, the Tokyo University of commerce and the Tokyo University of agriculture. He was also invited to teach at the Nikkaido College of physical education working with military and naval schools. the parents of the students also paid a visit to thank him for the positive changes that happened with their sons. he was told that their sons became healthier and stronger



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because of karate. these visits were significant to Funakoshi and he was extremely grateful to the parents who expressed their sincere thanks. Funakoshi became busier and busier as the number of people who wanted to learn karate grew. as he was confident they could support his entire family Tokyo, he wrote to his wife inviting her to move there. however she firmly refused even though all their sons were already living in Tokyo. she wanted to stay in Okinawa to perform her religious duties as a Buddhist, even though she supported Funakoshi in his work. Funakoshi finally conceded seeing that his wife's decision when change even though it meant years of them not seeing each other. on September 1, 1923 an earthquake struck Tokyo called the great Kanto earthquake. with a magnitude of 7.9 left casualties of more than 100,000 people many of Funakoshi's students died in that incident and those who survived including Funakoshi helped the ones in need of food and medical attention and they also helped in disposing of the dead bodies. the teaching of karate was temporarily postponed during that time because she didn't have any money to build his own dojo, though a good friend let him share his temporarily. years later in 1935, a committee of karate supporters pulled together enough funds on a national scale to erect the very first karate dojo in Japan. in 1936 Funakoshi arrived at the newly erected dojo. he saw sign over the door with the dojo's new name Shotokan. Funakoshi didn't know why the karate committee chose his pen name Shoto, the name that he used for his Chinese poems. this made him without a doubt very proud and very happy. however it also made him sad because his masters is Azato and Itosu had passed away and he would've love watch them teach in his new dojo. Funakoshi was already old at this time and he knew that his years were limited so he started two do his job. one of his first tasks was to set up the rules and the class schedules at the dojo as well as formalizing the requirements for rank. however, Foucault she had a problem it was a good problem the number of students grew and grew to the dojo couldn't accommodate all the people who wanted to learn. the dojo is just one of his duties, many universities also set up the karate groups and they needed instructors and clearly Funakoshi wouldn't be able to handle all of them. therefore, he assigned advanced students to be the instructors for those groups he also assigned his third son to assist him in running the dojo while he supervised the classes held in different locations.

Funakoshi was often asked why he chose the pen name shoto, it literally means pine waves in Japanese and seems to have no significance with karate but the truth is he chose that pending the reason he explained well. back in the day in his teen years, he used to travel to mount toro the near his town. whenever the wind blew he listened to the rustling of the Pines according to him one could feel the quote deep impenetrable mystery that lies at the root of all life and it sounded like a celestial music. on another occasion when he was in his 20s, he used to go to a park called Okonoyama, the park featured beautiful pine trees and a large lotus pond. here he enjoyed his solitude while listening to the wind rustling through the pines which he always loved. through the years of practicing karate became more and more attracted attached nature. he had peace of mind with every listen to the rustling of the pines and this helped him to be a more peaceful person. Funakoshi wife died in the 1930s from severe asthma in Oito Kyushu where she was also cremated. he was with his wife during her last days after being separated physically for many years. this saddening incident didn't hinder Funakoshi from his



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obligations. he returned to Tokyo in 1947 carrying his wife's ashes and continued teaching karate to tens of thousands of people. the last years were still full of activities despite his old age. he was able to write several books such as Karatedo Kyohan the master text and karatedo my way of life, his autobiography which he wrote before he died at the age of 90. Funakoshi died in 1957 from colon cancer and was buried Toshimagoka Cemetery. on December 1, 1968 the memorial was built for him at a Buddhist temple named [00:22:53.23] located in Kamakura. I have to confess after reading this and revising it and then reading it to all of you, it seems pretty clear to me that nearly 100 years ago martial arts at some of the same challenges that it has today. but here this man the so many of us look up to as a martial arts pioneer saw martial arts not only as a physical discipline but something so much more. that's my big take away from reading this, whether you're a shotokan practitioner, a karate practitioner maybe you're not even a Japanese martial arts practitioner, I think it would be hard to find any martial arts practitioner these days who in some way hasn't been influenced by the work of Gichin Funakoshi. pretty powerful when we get to see one of these things that at least tangentially has influenced all of us. I want to thank you for listening I hope you learned something, I certainly did. powerful stuff. I love this stuff, I love history. I don't think we can truly know we were at unless you know where we came from, come from? was a lot of words that I just read once in a while I stumble.

But I think you get the point if you want there's a transcript, I went off script a bit at times but you can certainly check that out. you can find it at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com love some photos of Funakoshi up there and of course whether your shotokan practitioner or not what do you think? what did you think of this episode? what you think of Funakoshi's legacy? Leave some comments. we don't get as many comments on the website as I would love to see because comments lead to conversation, conversation leads to understanding and I think that's critical to the mission that is this podcast. if you want to follow us on social media, you can find us we are @whistlekick on Facebook, on Twitter, on Instagram. you find us on YouTube, you can email me directly jeremy@whistlekick.com. this was a bit of a longer Thursday episode, let me you know what you think. do you like as we go this deep? or do you prefer the more surface cursory examinations of a person or topic. Wanna hear from you but for now I'm gonna let you go. that's all I got. so until next time train hard, smile, and have a great day.