

No First Strike?

By James I. Rodriguez

On a recent trip to a used bookstore, I found a copy of Karate-Do Kyohan, The Master Text, by Gichin Funakoshi, translated by Tsutomu Ohshima, originally published in 1973. I couldn't pass up the price of \$3.98 so I picked it up having always felt my library was incomplete without it. I've often times perused it at bookstores but always put it back because the price kept spiraling up. It is about \$40 now for a new copy. This is a testament to its worth as a resource and reference manual after all these years.

When I first opened it, I started reading some of the names of Shotokan kata in chapter 4. Under the heading of Taikyoku or "First Cause," (it is interesting to note that Taikyoku Shodan is almost identical to Genwa Ichi no Kata), I was astounded to read the description. In the second to last sentence, Tsutomu Ohshima translated the following passage, "Moreover, the student who has gained proficiency in basic techniques and understands the essence of the Taikyoku Kata will appreciate the real meaning of the maxim, **'In karate, there is no advantage in the first attack.'**"

What caught my attention was the use of the word "advantage." Saying there is no "advantage" in the first attack gave an entirely new meaning to Master Funakoshi's well known and often quoted maxim, "Karate ni sente nashi" or "In karate there is no first strike."

If there is no first strike by the karateka, then we have a Dō-form because we are only interested in using karate for personal development. However, if there is no "advantage" in making the first attack, it would indicate the "advantage" is in defending (and countering?) against the first attack. This is completely different philosophical approach. If we are talking about an "advantage" are we not talking about winning versus losing? If we are talking about not taking the first initiative and only protecting ourselves, are we not talking about a more defensive approach? This is the question that immediately struck me upon reading the sentence, "In karate, there is no advantage in the first attack."

I started pulling out books that referenced Master Funakoshi, and looked for other translations. I found that the majority referred to Master Funakoshi as a man who preferred the Dō focus as opposed to application or the winning of contests. However, in Patrick McCarthy's translation of Master Funakoshi's

book, *Karate-do Tanpenshu* (page 151) there is an article by Graham Noble called, "Master Funakoshi's Karate" which refers to the 20 precepts of Master Funakoshi. In the article he states, "Some writers have tried to point out the spiritual nature of Funakoshi's precepts, but I don't think they are profound in that sense. Funakoshi did believe in the "Dō" of karate, but more in the sense described by the Zen priest Takuan (1573-1646): "The law of the Buddha well observed, is identical with the law of mundane existence, The Way (Dō) is practical only."

"Master Funakoshi wasn't one to give metaphysical explanations for everything," recalled Tsutomu Ohshima. (The same Ohshima who translated *Karate-Do Kyohan*). "He was very practical and was influenced by the teachings of Confucius who never talked about great mysteries or spiritual issues. Funakoshi, like Confucius, was more interested in the world of people, ideas and events." So the precepts cover not only Funakoshi's wider view of karate—its underlying social and moral basis—but also advise technical principles, on principles of self-defense, and on how to integrate karate into daily life. Thus, they are well rounded and complete—and moreover, they give us an insight into Funakoshi sensei's philosophy of karate."

Perhaps, when *Karate-Do Kyohan* was first written, in the mid- to late 1950s, Shotokan had turned toward sport karate, culminating in the first Shotokan tournament in 1958. It was over 10 years after the end of WWII and karate was moving rapidly toward contests to determine which style was better, more effective, etc. This could have had an influence on the rendering or translation by Ohshima. In the 1922 publication of "*Karate-Jitsu*," Funakoshi sensei states on page 300 of the latest translation and book renamed "*To-Te Jitsu*," (translated by Shingo Ishida) "Karate, as a martial art, must be understood that it will involve two individuals to cause harm to themselves; thus, a first strike can hardly be justified, and in a sense, is foolish."

It appears that either Funakoshi sensei expanded his philosophy, perhaps due to the changing emphasis placed on kumite by his students, or Ohshima may have been a little too free in his translation having been influenced himself. I guess no one will ever know for sure. So the question remains, "Did Funakoshi sensei believe there is no first strike in karate for pacifist reasons or because he believed there is an 'advantage' in defense versus offense?"