The Perfection of Character: The Quintessence of Karate-Do

by Mark Kramer

We are all probably familiar with Mr. Gichin Funakoshi’s proclamation that "The ultimate aim of karate lies not in victory or defeat but in the perfection of the character of its participants." However, we may not be familiar with what motivated this great teacher to pen his universally recognized statement. It was in his youth that "his grandfather Gifuku, a noted scholar, taught him the Confucian Classics, essential education for a member of the shizoku [gentry] and the foundation of his later teachings on morality in the martial arts." Consequently, to gain a better perspective on what Mr. Funakoshi meant by "the perfection of character", we need to turn to the teachings of Confucius.

In the 6th century B.C. Confucius proposed a radical idea; he proposed that anyone could become a junzi, a superior man. Prior to this time, it was commonly believed that superior men were exclusively of noble birth, and the idea that anyone could acquire the characteristics of a junzi was unheard of. To Confucius, the method of becoming a superior person was "achieved by the practice of virtue and secured through education." Consequently, a nobleman who lacked virtue or an education was no junzi, but a commoner who was both virtuous and educated became a superior person.

To Confucius, the supreme virtue was ren, humaneness. "For Confucius, ren, the plenitude of humaneness is truly an absolute; it puts heroic demands upon every individual, and yet remains close at hand in everyday life." We shall later see how this Confucian virtue placed tremendous demands on Mr. Gichin Funakoshi, and witness how he embodied ren in everyday situations. To Confucius, an education was not about having specific knowledge or acquiring technical skills; an education was about "developing one’s humanity. Education is not about having; it is about being."

An education was supposed to enable one to overcome the obstacles that life placed in front of him, and any professional task that he endeavored; and "in his leisure time, he was supposed to be a competent calligrapher, poet, writer, painter, musician, and aesthete." We shall also see how a Confucian education prepared Mr. Funakoshi for the task of introducing the karate of Okinawa first to Japan and later to the civilized world.

Embodiment of Humaneness

Mr. Funakoshi always maintained that karate-do was to be used only as a last resort, and only in defense of human life. Mr. Funakoshi explained that "[I] performed a rite and pledged myself never to make use of my trained body for any illicit purpose." It was many years later that he found himself confronted by a situation that would challenge both his pledge and his dedication to the ideal of humaneness embodied in ren.

This incident occurred after the second world conflict when Mr. Funakoshi was about eighty years old. He had attended a poetry-reading party in Tamagawa and was returning to Tokyo late in the evening. In one hand he carried an umbrella to shield himself from the rain, and in the other hand he carried a satchel containing some books. Out of the shadows, "a black-clad figure sprang suddenly out from behind a telephone pole."

The assailant demanded "Untie your furoshiki [satchel] and let’s see what’s in it." Mr. Funakoshi resisted the thief’s demand and responded "There is nothing in it of the slightest value." At this point, the thief grabbed Mr. Funakoshi’s umbrella and swung it at his head. Mr. Funakoshi ducked under the strike and grabbed the man by his testicles. The thief loudly cried out; a police officer quickly appeared; and Mr. Funakoshi released his assailant into the custody of the police officer.

However, Mr. Funakoshi relates how he felt guilty over the incident. "I had done what I constantly tell my students not to do: I took the offensive. I did not feel very proud of myself." Mr. Funakoshi believed that he could have avoided the physical conflict altogether, and walked away while surrendering "nothing if the slightest value." Instead, he chose a course that led to a conflict.

Whereas some of us will perceive the elderly Mr. Funakoshi as being fully justified in defending himself against a much younger would-be robber, he did not believe that his actions were justified at all. In his moral paradigm, he had been willing to risk the life of another human over "nothing of the slightest value", and that was something that he had pledged himself never to do. Certainly, Mr. Funakoshi embodied the Confucian virtue of humaneness.

Mr. Funakoshi also embodied humaneness in his day-to-day dealings with people. Harry Cook explains "According to the teachings of Confucius, perfection of a person’s character could only be accomplished by the cultivation of good manners, so that whatever situation he would find himself in, he would act with courtesy and consideration for others." Hirokazu Kanazawa describes Mr. Funakoshi’s day-to-day actions. Funakoshi sensei was "a remarkable man. Gentle polite and kind, never using improper words. Even when addressing younger students, he would always address them with a polite: ‘Please Mr....’" No matter how stressful or how mundane the situation, Mr. Funakoshi always acted with supreme virtue.

Perhaps Richard Kim best sums up the humaneness of Mr. Funakoshi. "He was a humble man. He preached and practiced an essential humility. He lived at peace with himself and with his fellow men."

An Education of Being

It was Mr. Funakoshi’s Confucian education that led him to select his initial profession, public school teaching, and it was his love for karate that would direct many of his other important decisions in life. "As I had been taught the Chinese Classics from early childhood by my grandfather and Azato, I decided to make use of that knowledge and become a schoolteacher." When he began his school teaching in1891, Mr. Funakoshi was twenty-one years old.. Within a short period of time, he was recommended for several promotions within the teaching profession, but there was one promotion that he could not accept. Mr. Funakoshi explains "This particular promotion I turned down, for acceptance would have meant going to outlying districts and, consequently, separation from my karate teachers. This I could not possibly accept."

Mr. Funakoshi continued both his public school teaching and his karate training for thirty more years. Then in1922 the opportunity to introduce Okinawan karate to Japan presented itself. Mr. Funakoshi was invited to the capital of the Japanese Empire to demonstrate karate. After the demonstration, he intended to immediately return to Okinawa, but Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo, requested that he extend his stay. Mr. Funakoshi agreed and a short time later he made the fateful decision to stay indefinitely and teach karate in Japan. "It suddenly occurred to me that if I wanted to see karate introduced to the people of Japan, I was the man for the job, and Tokyo was the place to start."

Mr. Funakoshi wrote his karate teachers back in Okinawa telling them of his decision. He explains that they replied with "letters of encouragement, at the same time warning me that I would be in for a difficult time." The Japanese "looked down upon Okinawan karate and called it a pagan and savage art." Consequently Mr. Funakoshi knew that he was in for rough times. Initially he attracted few students, lived in abject poverty, "and had to take work as a janitor and handyman to survive."

However, as time passed he began to improve the situation; he decided "to spread karate among the more educated and cultured of Japanese society." Soon he began to attract more and more karate students from the ranks of Tokyo’s white-collar workers and university students. It was by this strategy that karate "was becoming better and better known to people in all walks of life." Mr. Funakoshi faced the obstacle of prejudice in spreading the martial art that he loved, but after nearly two decades of work he "overcame this prejudice and finally gained formal recognition of karate as one of the Japanese martial arts by 1941."

In his leisure time, Mr. Funakoshi was a calligrapher, a poet, and a writer. Even today, copies of some of Mr. Funakoshi’s calligraphy are available for sale at many martial arts stores and web sites. He wrote poetry some of which "expressed his hopes and aspirations" for the future of karate. He also authored four books – Karate Jitsu, Karate-Do My Way of Life, Karate-Do Kyohan: The Master Text, and Karate-Do Nyumon. Even Mr. Funakoshi’s leisure hours were spent in pursuit of Confucian educational endeavors.

Mr. Funakoshi was not a man who merely possessed technical skills and information. His education permeated his entire being. He was an accomplished educational professional for thirty years; he then went on to realize the difficult task of introducing Okinawan karate to a Japanese public, which viewed it with a condescending attitude. Yet this humble and humane man was able to change a nation’s attitudes and eventually open karate for worldwide study. It was not that Mr. Funakoshi succeeded and was also a Confucian gentleman; he succeeded because he was a Confucian gentleman.

Essence of Karate-Do

Mr. Masatoshi Nakayama explained that it is not karate, the martial art, which has attracted wide following; it is karate, the character builder, which attracted people to it. "The purpose of budo is not to gain a wide knowledge for fighting; rather the purpose of budo is to gain a very, very deep knowledge of one’s art in order to perfect one’s character and to see more clearly and deeply into one’s existence."

Today the once esoteric art of Okinawan karate is practiced not only in Okinawa and Japan, but also globally by people of all civilized nations. Japan’s former Minister of State for Science and Technology Policy explains "Today, karate do has spread all over the world and become very popular. This is because karate-do is considered a good means for building character." A gentle, polite, and humble man’s goal has reached fruition.

This is the legacy of a Confucian gentleman and an example of the perfection of character. This is the essence of karate-do.

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