

Continuity of Study

From Patrick & Yuriko McCarthy's The Legend of the Fist, Volume 1:

“On a completely unrelated topic I’m, in the middle of studying bone- and joint-related exercises from a lying position. If I discover something important, I’ll be sure to let you know in detail.”

--Gichin FUNAKOSHI, 1914

In part of an article in which Funakoshi recalls the words of his teacher Ankoh AZATO, the future founder of Shotokan writes, “It is not possible to become a great martial artist without an education.” Funakoshi was known as a more academic type than other famous martial artists, so I wonder if this statement shows a bias to his way of studying the martial arts, or if it would have been the accepted norm for Okinawan karate masters. We know that it was traditional to balance *budo* and *shodo* (martial arts and calligraphy), and that, in Okinawa, the village martial arts master was often considered the wise elder or sometimes the village doctor, so I tend to believe that the intention to balance education with martial training was at least the ideal if not also the norm.

I was struck by the introductory quote because it sounded so much like phone conversations I have had with other life-long martial artists (masters or otherwise) in which one of us was explaining what he is working on, and the other was reflecting on similar subjects that were outside of his art’s official curriculum. As I have written and said many times, “the curriculum is not the art” any more than passing a history test makes one an historian.

In 1914, Funakoshi would have been 46 years old, and would have been a karate student for approximately 33 years. Most Westerners, reflecting on Funakoshi’s own description of his training under Master Azato in *Karate-do, My Way of Life* (originally called *Karate-do, Ichiro*), picture him in a small Okinawan backyard, repeating his kata again and again without much correction. I, for one, never pictured him studying much of anything that was not *makiwara*, *kihon*, *keri*, or *kata*. And yet there it is, by his own hand: his studying not only joint exercises, but joint exercises *done from a lying position*. Does that not sound like ground grappling?

Regardless of whether my interpretation of Funakoshi’s passage is accurate, there can be no doubt that he valued *studying* his art, not just repeating it, not just drilling in it, but *understanding the possibilities* that lay within. He states directly that one cannot be a martial arts master without an education. What sort of education did he have in mind—high school, college, ongoing training? We Westerners tend to measure the intelligence of a person by his or her level of education. Sorry, but that standard was applicable when the average public school student was lucky to graduate high school. Nowadays almost everyone can get into some sort of college, and even those that graduate from the most notable of universities are not necessarily more intelligent than those who took their further education upon themselves. Two of the most intelligent martial

artists I know not only did not go to college, but also have studied and continue to study many subjects in addition to, and sometimes as an adjunct to, their martial arts. Where they chose to deny themselves a *formal* academic education, they never gave up on education itself.

Formal or informal, having an ongoing education is tantamount to being a lifelong learner. That is why those who earn a rank and feel proud to display their belt to others not only quit the dojo after the thrill is gone, but also quit any martial arts-related studies. They seldom rise to the level of mastery.

Education does not guarantee mastery, of course, but mastery guarantees that the master has been educated.