

Book Title

Walking Upright: The Story of Gichin Funakoshi

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Walking Upright

堂々と歩む

Dōdō to ayumu

A novel inspired by true events

The Story of Gichin Funakoshi

Milton Chanés

This work recreates, on the basis of documented facts, episodes from the life of Gichin Funakoshi and his disciples. Certain dialogues, scenes, and details have been fictionalized to convey the atmosphere of the era.

Prologue

The life of Gichin Funakoshi goes far beyond that of a simple martial arts master. He was born in Shuri, Okinawa —the ancient heart of the *Ryūkyū* Kingdom— into a shizoku-class family, heirs to the samurai tradition.

His original surname was *Tominakoshi*, later changed to Funakoshi, although it remains unclear exactly when this occurred.

He himself, in his book translated into English as *Karate-Do: My Way of Life*, recounts that he had a fragile, sickly childhood, and that his father, *Gisū*, came from a family that had served as vassals to the old nobles of the kingdom.

To strengthen his health, young Gichin began practicing martial arts, and along that path he found much more than physical vigor; he discovered a moral and spiritual way that would shape the course of his life.

The encounter with Ankō Asato and Ankō Itosu was decisive. From childhood, Funakoshi trained under the watchful eyes of both masters, and that double

tutelage guided all his youth. Even as an adult he continued visiting them, learning from them for as long as life allowed, until, one by one, they passed away.

Asato and Itosu not only forged his technique but also his character; they taught him that *Tōde* was not simply combat, but inner discipline, respect, and moral formation.

Even when he was already working as an assistant instructor in Okinawa, he remained a loyal disciple of Asato, walking each night to his residence to train under the faint glow of the lamps; from those long hours of silent practice emerged the seed of what, with the passing years and his consecration in Tokyo, would transform that almost-secret Okinawan art into a universal discipline: *Karate-dō*.

With humility and perseverance, he taught in open courtyards, student halls, and temples, repeating always the same message: *Tōde* had to be a way of life, not an instrument of violence.

His writings, from *Ryūkyū Kempo Karate* to *Karate-dō Kyōhan*, shaped a philosophy that united tradition, respect, and self-improvement.

In 1949, his students founded the Japan Karate Association (JKA), with Funakoshi as honorary president, consolidating his legacy and formalizing his teachings.

The story of Funakoshi is also the story of the beginning of karate's expansion beyond Okinawa. His public demonstrations, its introduction into Japanese universities, and the opening of the first *dōjō* in Tokyo marked the beginning of a dissemination that, through his students, would turn it into a global practice.

However, his importance transcends the realm of karate. If we look closely at his life, we discover that the true expansion of his legacy began in a later stage, when he was already past fifty. And even so, his influence reached extraordinary dimensions. Because if today we add up the millions of *Karate-Dō* practitioners—whether from the *Shotokan* style or from other schools created by his direct disciples or by those indirectly inspired by his teachings—we arrive at a figure that defies all logic.

Even more so when we consider that it is not a commercial enterprise nor an industrial brand, but a martial art: an intimate discipline, transmitted from person to person.

That a person like Funakoshi, a teacher, originated a movement of such magnitude solely through his

example, his humanity, and his vision of self-control reveals the depth of his legacy and his capacity to transform lives, generations, and entire cultures.

He passed away in 1957, at the age of 88, leaving behind not only a martial art but a philosophy of life. His teaching was immortalized by his students through monuments erected at the *Engaku-ji* Temple in *Kamakura* and in *Onoyama* Park in *Naha*, where he often meditated.

Yet beyond dates and achievements, what remains is his essential teaching:

空手に先手なし

Karate ni sente nashi

The phrase “*In karate, there is no first attack*” —read as “*Karate ni sente nashi*”— is engraved for eternity on the stone that commemorates him at the *Engaku-ji* Temple in *Kamakura*.

This principle embodies the greatness of his legacy. It does not speak of overpowering an opponent, but of conquering oneself. Nor does it speak of seeking conflict, but of living with dignity, respect, and inner mastery.

As he himself wrote, “*Karate is the martial art of the wise man*” —*Karate wa kunshi no bugei*—, his vision transcended physical combat to embrace the path of self-control and peace.

That spirit is what I have sought to evoke in the title “*Walking Upright*”.

堂々と歩む

Dōdō to ayumu

This book is not an exhaustive biography, but rather a narrated homage to the figure of a man who, with simple yet steadfast steps, taught the world that true victory does not lie in defeating others, but in perfecting oneself — that the most genuine battle is the one fought within.

Introduction

The first time I wore a *karategi* was in 1987. In truth, it wasn't one — it was an old *judogi* sewn by a dressmaker for my mother, who had practiced judo for a short time years earlier. I only had a yellow belt, and with it I showed up at the Club Remeros Paysandú that February, where Julio Campopiano —a respected and well-known *Sensei* in Uruguay, and a former training partner of my mother— was teaching.

We trained outdoors, at night, under the intense heat of summer.

My first classes were not yet true *Karate-dō*, but rather physical conditioning — breakfalls, countless sit-ups, running, and endurance exercises.

Why did I stay, if I hadn't even learned to strike yet? I'm not entirely sure. Perhaps because there was something different in the air — an atmosphere of respect. I quickly learned what *Kōhai*, *Senpai*, and *Sensei* meant. By the next class, I already had my white belt, and that group of strangers became a circle of friends who still accompany me today.

The *dōjō* at Club Remeros Paysandú was demanding. The floor, made of rough concrete, scraped like sandpaper; after only a few sessions, the first blisters appeared — until our feet toughened. We ran barefoot

through the streets, over gravel and asphalt, and trained without protective gear. It was the late 1980s, a time when people believed that training hard meant emulating the old masters of the JKA.

In fact, our *dōjō* had two *makiwara* wrapped with strips of tire rubber at the top, where we struck until our knuckles grew calloused.

Our training followed the traditional line of the Japan Karate Association —*Nihon Karate Kyōkai*—, which had reached South America in the 1960s through Master Michihisa Itaya, who arrived in Buenos Aires in October 1966.

After his tragic death in a car accident in 1972, his place was taken by *Sensei* Mitsuo Inoue, who continued teaching the *Shōtōkan* style under the direction of the JKA. He was the first Japanese master I ever met in person — strong, deep-voiced, unforgettable. I took all my *kyū* examinations under him.

Many years later, already living in Spain, I resumed training in Logroño with Dr. Rafael Ibáñez Moro, who showed me another way of practicing *Karate-dō* — one that emphasized movement, dynamism, and the leg

techniques that had always challenged me more than others. I learned a great deal, and above all, I had fun.

The path eventually led me to meet *Sensei* Nelson Carrión in 2014 — a direct student of *Sensei* Hidetaka Nishiyama — through whom I discovered a level of technical and conceptual refinement that forced me to unlearn and begin anew. He was introduced to me by *Sensei* Carlos Demarco, my Senpai in Uruguay. That meeting felt like starting again from zero — yet also like seeing, for the first time, where the *dō* truly led. Since then, I have trained under his guidance — often in solitude — yet always inspired by his words and his example.

I rediscovered that same spirit at the *dōjō* of Stara Wieś, in Poland, when I had the opportunity to train with masters such as Mahmoud Tabassi, Albert Cheah, Włodzimierz Kwieciński, and *Sensei* Carrión himself. There, during the summer *gasshuku*, I once again felt what I had felt on my very first day in Paysandú — a blend of distance and closeness, of humility and aspiration.

The setting was modern and comfortable — a pool, sauna, cushioned tatami mats, and Japanese-style houses in the heart of Poland — yet the martial spirit remained untouched. Despite all those comforts, the essence was the same. Surrounded by more than three hundred

karateka —mostly Polish, but also Czech, Russian, Ukrainian, Brazilian, and others— I experienced once again the true spirit of the *dōjō*; martial discipline. Exceptional karateka, without a doubt.

They impressed me so deeply that in the summer of 2016, I thought reaching their level would take me three lifetimes. They seemed unreachable.

Over time, once I had moved to Germany, I began taking part in their tournaments. Every time I step onto the podium —regardless of the place— my satisfaction lies not in the medal itself, but in knowing I have drawn a little closer to the right path. That progress, I must say, is the result of *Sensei* Carrión’s method and guidance.

Many of them are still more complete martial artists than I am, but thanks to their teachings I have been able to shorten the time it takes to learn and understand. That is why I compete with them, not against them — because they are my measure, not my rivals. My only purpose is to surpass myself, to be better than the version of me from yesterday. I don’t even like standing on the podium beneath a flag; I do not represent a country — I represent my own pursuit of growth.

Sensei Carrión believes we should not compete, yet I do so because it is my chance to share moments with people who love the same thing I do. The camaraderie and friendships I've forged through these tournaments more than justify it. Visiting Poland, the Czech Republic, Italy, France, Spain, or Brazil has always been a pleasure, because in every place karate has given me encounters and friendships.

Karate draws no line between rich and poor, between scholars and children. It is universal. Even if we speak different languages, we always understand one another. That spirit was born with Funakoshi Sensei.

This path has forced me to start over more than once. Each teacher conveyed the same essential message, yet in his own way. That is the beauty of traditional *Karate-dō*; every reinterpretation is born from tireless practice, like a painter who first masters form before discovering his own voice.

I remember that small black-and-white photo we all bowed to upon entering the *dōjō* — a simple gesture, filled with respect for the man who shaped what we practice today. That image has accompanied me ever since, and in this work I wanted to pay tribute to him; that is why it is also part of the cover. Those who have practiced

Karate-dō Shōtōkan know exactly which photo I am referring to.

This book does not aim to be exhaustive, but to offer a narrative where history and personal experience intertwine — an attempt to honor the master of our masters. More than recounting his life, it seeks to convey his spirit, the same spirit that can still be felt every time a *Karate-dō* practitioner bows before that photo and remembers that, ultimately, the true battle is with oneself.

道の始まり

Michi no hajimari

Part I

The beginning of the way

Chapter 1

The ashes of a dream

Tokyo, Spring 1945

The vehicle moved slowly—one of those old wartime cars, repaired again and again, one of the few civilian automobiles that had escaped military requisition—advancing with effort along a path cleared between the rubble. Each pothole made the engine shudder, and the smell of smoke drifted in through the windows. In the distance, one could still hear the crackling of collapsing wooden beams.

The man at the wheel kept his gaze fixed ahead, lips pressed tight. Beside him, his sixteen-year-old son watched the ruins pass in silence through the window.

—Taka-chan... —the father said at last, using the affectionate nickname of a lifetime—. I still don't understand why you.

—What do you mean, Father? —the boy asked as he turned toward him.

—Of all his students, why would they send a boy? Why didn't one of the senior students come?

The son drew a long breath.

—At first, Obata-senpai or Egami-sensei were going to come. Even Nakayama-senpai considered it. But they all preferred to stay there, clearing rubble, trying to put in order whatever could be saved. They wanted Sensei to find at least a hint of dignity among the ruins when he arrived.

The father raised his eyebrows.

—And then?

—Then Nakayama-*senpai* said my name. He said I was always willing to help. And besides... this way I could travel with you.

The man let out a brief laugh.

—That Nakayama... But I still think it's too much responsibility for someone your age.

—I'm sixteen, Father.

—Exactly.

The boy shrugged.

—I don't know. They all agreed. And after so many days locked inside because of the sirens and the bombings, the chance to go out and take a walk seemed like a good idea.

—Yes, but this isn't a walk, Taka-chan. Getting this car ready for the trip was complicated enough, and it's almost a miracle it still runs. I just hope it doesn't give us trouble before we get there.

The boy turned toward the window.

—I know, it's not a walk. And I don't think it's going to be a pleasant sight for a long time. We'll have to learn to live in this madness.

The man nodded.

—That's true. None of us agrees with what's happening. But there are still men who show us another path. And those men must be accompanied.

The boy lowered his gaze, a shy pride softening his expression.

—He's different, Father... Is it because he's not Japanese?

The man smiled faintly, almost amused.

—No, Taka-chan. Of course he's Japanese. But he's not from here, not from Tokyo. He comes from Okinawa, and that makes a difference.

The son looked at him, curious.

—How different is it to grow up there?

The father nodded slowly.

—Very different. Okinawa didn't experience this fever of empire and conquest the way we did. Its people grew up with another music, another calm. It is a place that knows poverty, simplicity, and the harshness of the sea, not the arrogance of uniforms or grandiloquent speeches.

The boy murmured softly, as if suddenly understanding something important.

—So it's not that he's less Japanese... it's that he learned to look at the world in another way.

—Exactly —the father replied in a low voice—. He wasn't shaped by the pride of the cities, but by the humility of a distant island. That's why he's different. That's why he seems more human than all of us.

The Toyota crawled onward, as if it too struggled to make its way through the destroyed streets. In some stretches, the rubble forced the father to maneuver carefully, avoiding charred beams, broken vehicles, and the occasional overturned cart. Along the sides of the road, people pushed wheelbarrows loaded with the little they

had left; others moved on rusty bicycles, and some pulled small makeshift carts, a forced replacement for the cars the war had stolen from them. Little by little, as they left the center behind, the air began to clear—less smoke, less smell of ash.

They entered Mejiro, a residential district that had resisted the bombings better. There, the low houses still stood, some with battered but living gardens, as if refusing to disappear entirely.

While the car moved slowly forward, the boy broke the silence.

—Father... what I still don't understand is why his son didn't come.

—Which of his sons do you mean, Waka-sensei?

—Yes, of course.

The man kept his eyes on the road, his voice lowering a tone.

—That's impossible. This very morning I spoke with his brother. He explained everything to me. Waka-sensei can barely breathe now. It's impossible for him to come with us.

The boy looked at him in surprise.

—He was always strong... I have no doubt he'll recover.

—Let's hope so —the man murmured, lowering his voice—. But I haven't seen him these days, and his brother confessed he's very ill. He has almost no strength left; you can see the exhaustion in every gesture.

—Father, what's his brother's name?

—Yoshihide, the eldest —he answered after a pause—. He was the one who explained in detail where we would find his father. He told me one of his students would accompany me, but I didn't imagine it would be you.

—I know who he is. I visited him at his home some time ago. And I think he also has a daughter; I've seen her once or twice when I went to the dōjō to train.

—Funakoshi-*sensei* has two daughters, as far as I know: Tsuru and Uto.

—Then... how many children does Ro-*sensei* have?

The father let out a quiet sigh.

—I'm not entirely sure. I believe five in total. It's even possible he had another child who died in Okinawa, but I couldn't say for certain.

—So... was it Yoshihide who asked you to go pick up Sensei?

—Not exactly. A few days ago I received a letter at the office from *Waka-sensei*, delivered by someone. In it, he asked me for this favor, because he said I was one of the few who still had a working car. I had to repair it in a hurry for this trip, but I couldn't bring myself to refuse him.

—I understand, Father.

—I imagine he then asked Nakayama to find someone to accompany me... and that's how you ended up here.

—Yes... maybe.

Silence filled the car for a few seconds. Outside, the ruins drifted by like slow-moving ghosts. The boy lowered his gaze, finally understanding.

—It must be *Waka-sensei's* doing —he said at last, in a faint voice.

The father nodded slowly.

—Yes, Taka-chan. Very likely. Sick as he is, *Waka-sensei* still manages to organize everything.

The son asked, curious:

—Father, why is *Sensei* here? Do you know? I suppose he must have friends, or some family nearby... — the boy murmured.

—Perhaps —the father replied after a pause—. The truth is, I don't know. It may have been his children who encouraged him to stay in this neighborhood: far enough from the devastated center, yet not too far from them.

—Is his wife with him?

—I don't think so. Women and children were evacuated to different places. I don't know whether she's managed to return yet.

—Does he know what condition his house is in?

—I'm not sure —the father murmured—, but he must imagine it. If the *dōjō* is destroyed, it's hard to believe his home —which stood right across from it— could have survived.

The boy then fixed his gaze ahead.

In the distance, beside a tree that had somehow survived, bent and scorched, a figure stood waiting in silence.

—Father... there he is —he whispered, raising his hand—. Look.

The car slowed. Both fell silent, almost holding their breath. There stood Funakoshi, seventy-six years old. Standing, his body thin and slightly bent with age, yet dressed in an immaculate gray silk kimono. He held his hat by the brim, pressing it lightly against his chest, as if that simple gesture were enough to lend solemnity to the moment.

He was not tall nor strong, yet his mere presence seemed to fill everything around him. When he saw the car approaching, he straightened with calm dignity.

The father lowered his voice, as if afraid to disturb the moment:

—Do you see? He is always like this. No matter his age, nor the ruin around him. He has something... something that cannot be explained.

The boy watched him, fascinated, eyes shining.

—That's why we follow him, isn't it?

—Yes, Taka-chan. Because some men do not need to shout their greatness. It is enough simply to stand.

The car came to a gentle stop. Funakoshi lifted his gaze toward them. With calm composure, he placed the hat upon his head, as one who receives an important visit.

When the boy hurried out and bowed deeply, the elderly man responded with a serene, faint smile—just enough to ease the tension of the encounter.

—Ah... so they sent the youngest to fetch the oldest—he said with a slight smile, resting his eyes on the boy—Hidetaka, how are you?

The teenager lifted his head, surprised to be addressed directly. It didn't sound like a reproach; it was an affectionate gesture, tinged with warmth.

The father stepped forward, bowing respectfully.

—Funakoshi-*sensei*, we've come to take you to the *dōjō*. The others are waiting for you.

—What remains of the *dōjō*... —the master corrected gently, without altering his tone.

Both men grimaced slightly, acknowledging the truth in his words.

—Please, *Sensei* —the father said, extending his arm toward the car.

Funakoshi adjusted his hat calmly and walked toward the vehicle with short, steady steps.

—Where should I sit? —he asked, as if only courtesy mattered.

The boy answered with contained enthusiasm:

—*Ro-sensei*, you'll be more comfortable in the back.

The old man nodded, removed his hat, and placed it carefully beside him on the rear seat before settling in with quiet dignity.

The boy returned to his place beside his father in the front seat. From there, with a simple turn of his head, he could see the master's profile, absorbed in whatever lay beyond the window.

The steering wheel was on the right, like in all Japanese cars. In the rearview mirror, the father saw Funakoshi's face—calm, neither discouraged nor angry, gathered in quiet thought.

The boy remained silent. He felt that the image would stay with him forever: the man everyone called *Ro-sensei*, or simply *Sensei*, sitting in the back seat of his father's car—one of the few that still functioned in the

master's entire circle—radiating the serenity of someone who had learned to accept both life and ruin.

—*Sensei*, it will take us a little over an hour to reach the *dōjō*, maybe two —the father warned—. The roads are still full of debris, and there are crews clearing the streets. There are also checkpoints along the way.

Funakoshi nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving the window.

—No problem —he replied quietly—. I'm in no hurry to arrive.

After a few seconds, the boy gathered the courage to ask:

—Is your wife well?

The master inclined his head slightly.

—Thank you for asking, Hidetaka. Yes, she is well. Gosei is with my daughters. As soon as it's possible, we will be together again.

His eyes drifted back to the devastated landscape as the car advanced among the ruins and the figures carrying wood. There was no impatience in his expression—only the melancholy of someone who

observes the world in silence, thoughtful, with the calm of one who has learned to accept the inevitable.

Chapter 2

The doctor's advice

Shuri, Kingdom of Ryūkyū. Autumn, 1874

A trusted family doctor arrived at dusk, just as the humid air carried the briny scent from the harbor and the north wind made the wooden shutters creak. Shadows stretched across the red tiles, worn down by the sea breeze. He carried with him his polished wooden medical case and that measured, almost ceremonial courtesy of someone who served families of government officials.

Little Gichin was five years old, though in a few weeks he would turn six, with a body so fragile that every breath seemed an effort. His narrow, sunken chest made the air enter with difficulty, as if it had to force its way inside. They watched him in silence—his mother beside him, hand ready to support him, and his father, Gishū Funakoshi, standing with a worried expression.

The doctor leaned his ear close to the boy, ran his fingers along the bony back, and when he finished, he let out a sigh. That sound hung in the room, invisible and tense, like a rope on the verge of snapping.

—He is weak —he said at last, in a low voice, as if afraid to wound—. Very weak. He will need care. Little time outdoors. Little exposure. Plenty of calm.

The mother pressed her lips together, holding back her words. The father stepped forward.

—Will he recover? —he asked, his voice heavy with worry.

The doctor held his gaze and spoke slowly, like someone carrying a difficult truth:

—I've been treating him since he was born. When he was smaller, I had more doubts; it seemed he wouldn't make it through his first winter... and yet, he always found a way to rise again. That gives me hope. But I must also tell you the truth: each year the illness strikes him harder, and it takes him longer to recover.

He opened his case and took out a small paper packet filled with dried leaves.

—We'll continue with the same medicine, but I'll increase the dosage. These are herbs that help warm the chest and clear the breath—licorice, dried ginger, and a bit of cinnamon. Have him take them boiled in water, twice a day, for a month. The body needs help to buy time... and time, sometimes, is the best medicine.

—Is there anything else we can do for him? —asked Gishū Funakoshi, his voice heavy with concern.

The doctor looked at him in silence, then turned his eyes back to the boy.

—Not for now. His body is too fragile. If we push him, he'll grow with more problems than he already has. But in the future, he should learn Tōde —he said firmly.

Little Gichin, seated to one side, listened without moving, his large eyes fixed on the doctor.

The man went on:

—For the moment, the best thing is for him to focus on his studies. Let him spend more time indoors, away from the sudden changes of air and humidity. That will give him calm and keep him safe. Sometimes the discipline of letters is the best medicine.

Gishū nodded slowly, remaining silent. He knew his son was fragile, but he also sensed that the serenity in the boy's eyes concealed something more. Even if the doctor doubted his body, he trusted that the child's spirit would find its own path to strength.

From then on, the house changed its sound. Instead of the shouts of other children chasing crabs along the stream, the boy's voice repeated syllables beside the tatami. The neighbors saw him pass through the doorway and whispered "*poor little boy*", but he seemed not to hear

them. He would sit in the slanting afternoon light with a brush far too large for his fingers, copying characters very slowly, as if each stroke were a breath he had to learn.

He did not play at wrestling in the dust. He did not climb the highest branches of the fukugi tree or scrape his knees on the slopes behind the shrine. Instead, he learned to listen. To hear the rain arriving from the sea before the clouds appeared. To tell the difference in the tatami fibers when someone entered in haste. To smell the awamori on men's breath at the end of the day, and to know that behind every burst of laughter, there was a story.

The other children, toughened by the sun and the streets, laughed loudly whenever they saw him—so serious and so thin. Sometimes they shoved him as they passed and ran off between bursts of laughter. Gichin never complained; he had learned that pain always arrived late, like an echo. He had found a trench in the pages. There, he could be strong; there, his hands knew more than his body. He drew, painted, wrote short poems he never showed—barely three or four lines, where the sea and the wind were friends who visited him every afternoon.

He spent much of his childhood at home, devoted to calligraphy and literature rather than physical play. He also attended the school in Shuri, where at first he received the traditional instruction of the former Ryūkyū Kingdom. But in 1879 everything changed: the kingdom was abolished and turned into the Prefecture of Okinawa, and he began studying under the Japanese system.

He was ten years old then. It was in those classrooms that he became a classmate and friend of the son of Anko Asato. He did not know it yet, but that friendship would mark the beginning of a path that would transform his life.

Chapter 3

**Without questions, there
are no answers**

The car moved slowly, weaving around mounds of ash and blackened beams that still exhaled smoke along the edges of the street. Tokyo breathed a wounded silence, a muted murmur where once there had been laughter, market cries, and hurried footsteps. Every turn was a reminder of the war—twisted pillars, collapsed roofs, open scars in the earth.

In the back seat, Master Funakoshi looked out through the window. The gray *kimono* folded into soft creases over his knees, where a pair of thin, motionless hands rested. His face, serene and austere, gave no hint as to whether he was contemplating the ruins before him or memories far older. The day before, he had been visited by his son Giei, who had convinced him to accept Nishiyama's help in reaching the destroyed *dōjō*. What he had not expected was to do so by car.

In the front seat, sixteen-year-old Hidetaka cast furtive glances backward. He had waited the entire morning for this moment—to be alone with him, away from the *dōjō*, holding the quiet hope of daring to ask what he had so often swallowed in silence. He did not yet know which word to choose or where to begin, but he understood one thing clearly: being this close to the

master was like standing beside a spring; all one needed was to lean in to drink.

The first to break the silence was the man at the wheel, Hidetaka's father, a lawyer by profession:

—Sensei, I'm sorry I can't go any faster. The roads are still covered with debris.

Funakoshi nodded slowly, without taking his eyes from the window.

—No hurry —he replied in a deep voice—. Time is no longer measured the same way for me.

Silence filled the car again, dense and expectant. Then the boy leaned back slightly and, with respect, let his restrained voice escape:

—Ro-sensei... may I ask you something?

The old man turned his head and looked at him. In his calm there was a weight that made any reproach unnecessary.

—Ask, Hidetaka. Always ask. The only way to learn is to dare to ask first.

The boy swallowed hard.

—I’ve read some of your books, Sensei... —he said timidly—. Who was your favorite teacher? And why did you have two?

—Hidetaka! —his father intervened at once, frowning—. Don’t be impertinent.

Funakoshi raised his hand slightly, stopping the reprimand with a serene gesture.

—Don’t worry, Mr. Nishiyama —he answered gently—. Your son’s question isn’t inappropriate. On the contrary, it’s valuable. Besides, if we talk, the journey will feel shorter for all of us.

The boy lowered his eyes for a moment, but lifted them again, hopeful. Funakoshi was watching him with the calm of someone who understands that questions are born from the most genuine restlessness.

—You see, Hidetaka —the master began—, life placed in my path two men who were very different and yet deeply united in the art of Te, as we called it in Okinawa. One was Master Ankō Asato; the other, Ankō Itosu. I owe who I am to both of them, and I honor them each time I teach. Although I had the privilege of learning from others, it was they who shaped me the most. Everything I transmit has its roots in their teachings.

Even my own father knew something of *Te*. But in Okinawa nothing was taught formally; practice was almost always clandestine, without written rules or organized schools. There were no manuals, no titles, no ambition for styles. Each master taught what he had learned and, above all, what he himself had discovered to be useful through experience.

Thus, movements were passed on like a torch carried from hand to hand. Over time, in each village certain gestures took on greater importance than others, and little by little they evolved into more refined techniques. From this were born the distinctions we now call Shuri-te, Naha-te, and Tomari-te. Not because they were different arts, but because men, in order to understand, tend to classify. Deep down, they all shared the same spirit: to protect life, temper character, and strengthen the body.

The difference lay in the gaze of each master. One gave greater importance to breathing, another to fluidity, another to speed. And by insisting on those aspects, they eventually perfected them. Their disciples continued that refinement and thus, little by little, the currents we now know were born.

Most people simply repeated without asking why. It was done that way because it worked, and that was enough. But I had the good fortune of learning from masters who were not afraid of questions. They always encouraged me to inquire, and when they had no answer, they had the humility to send me to seek it from another master. That is true greatness—to accept that knowledge is never complete, that it can only be shared and expanded together.

That is why I visited different masters and observed their differences attentively, until I understood that all of them shared the same foundation. It was then that I grasped the true value of *kata*. They were not empty choreography, but a silent language, a manual written in movement. Within them was kept the memory of the masters of the past, and the possibility of discovering the deeper meaning behind each gesture.

—Sensei, if *kata* are a language, how does one learn to read what is hidden within them?

—The true essence of *Te* —the master replied after a brief pause— is to understand before executing. Only when you know why the hand moves... is when, in truth, the spirit moves.

—So through them you learned to give meaning to every movement? —Hidetaka asked, leaning forward.

—You could say so —the master nodded—. But the explanation is more complex. And since today time is on our side, let us go deeper into it, if that is all right with you.

—It would be an honor, *Sensei* —the boy said, bowing slightly in a gesture of gratitude from his seat.

The car moved slowly through the city's rubble. Outside, the ruins of Tokyo seemed to listen as well to the old man's voice.

—Asato-sensei —Funakoshi continued— was a man of noble spirit—strict and wise. He came from a family of some standing, and besides mastering the art of *Te*, he had been educated in horsemanship, fencing, and the military arts. He was a strategist, someone who understood that combat is not merely the clash of forces, but the precise calculation of the moment. From him I learned the importance of inner discipline and strategy.

He paused, and his eyes seemed to settle on a memory.

—Asato had the habit of making me repeat a single movement for hours, sometimes for days. He wasn't

trying to make me memorize a technique, but to fuse with it until there was no longer any difference between the gesture and my own being. “*Do not be satisfied with learning the kata,*” he would say. “*Become the kata.*”

The boy listened, fascinated, leaning back in his seat so as not to miss a single word.

—And then there was Itosu-sensei —Funakoshi continued—. He was different. More approachable, closer to the common people. He cared deeply for children, and it was he who insisted that Te should cease to be a secret passed on in hidden courtyards and instead be brought into the schools. He had a generous heart, and he understood that the future of the art did not lie in adults already formed, but in the young—those who could still be shaped. With him I learned not only techniques, but also the patience and clarity needed to pass them on.

It was Itosu-*sensei* who created many of the basic kata we still practice today—for example, the *kata* we now call *Heian*. He created them under their Okinawan name, *Pinan*, designing them with students in mind, to offer them a safe path as they began their journey into the art.

—So... he created the *Pinan* in order for us to understand the older kata more easily? —Hidetaka asked.

—Not exactly—the master replied in a calm voice—. Itosu-*sensei* did not think of the old *kata* as a riddle that needed to be simplified. What he sought was to offer young people—especially children—a path their still-immature bodies could walk. The movements of the traditional *kata* could be too demanding for their motor skills, too rough for muscles and joints that were only beginning to form.

That is why he created the *Pinan*—not as a simple copy of what was ancient, but as a bridge that would prepare them in discipline, balance, and clarity of movement, so that later, when their bodies grew strong and their minds tempered, they could enter the older *kata* and understand them with true depth.

—Why was the name changed to *Heian, Sensei*?— Hidetaka asked respectfully.

Funakoshi inclined his head slightly, as if stepping back into time.

—Because names contain a spirit, and each spirit must find its place in the language of those who practice it. When Itosu-*sensei* created those *kata* and called them “*the path toward peace and tranquility*”—which is what *Pinan* means in *uchināguchi*, the Okinawan language—he

was thinking of the children of the island. But when I brought *Tōde* to Japan, I discovered that, for the Japanese, the word *Pinan* was difficult to pronounce and even harder to remember.

He paused, and his thin hands moved over his knees, as though accompanying the memory.

—In Japanese, the natural pronunciation transformed *Pinan* into something close to *Heian*. And since *Heian* also means “*peace and calm*,” I understood that it was a perfect solution. It preserved the original meaning and, at the same time, acquired a clearer resonance for Japanese students. I changed the name not to alter my master’s intention, but so that his teaching could be understood, repeated, and transmitted without stumbling in a new land.

He lifted his gaze toward Hidetaka and added in a firm yet serene tone:

—The name changes, but the spirit does not. Itosu-sensei wanted those *kata* to open the path for all young people. I merely ensured that this path could also be walked in Japan, with the same clarity with which he had dreamed it in Okinawa.

Hidetaka's father, without taking his eyes off the road, intervened respectfully:

—Then, *Sensei*, could one say that one was the guardian of tradition and the other the sower of the future?

Funakoshi nodded slowly.

—It is a fair image. Asato protected the root—the deep spirit of the art—with the severity of a samurai. Itosu, on the other hand, opened the branches toward society, toward children, toward modernity. I had the good fortune of drinking from both sources. Sometimes I think that without those two men, karate would never have left Okinawa nor reached Japan.

—And how do these basic kata help, if I may ask, to better understand a movement, *Sensei*?

—Let us take an example —Funakoshi said calmly—. The first movement of the kata *Pinan Nidan*, which you know as *Heian Shodan*.

—Well... it begins with a low block, *gedan-barai*, and then you strike with *tsuki*, —the student answered confidently.

—Exactly, those are the visible gestures. But tell me—what do you think is truly sought with those two movements?

—According to what they explained to us... —he began to say, but the master interrupted him gently.

—No. I don't want you to repeat what you've heard —the master said calmly—. You practice *Kendō*, don't you? Then I want your own interpretation of those movements.

Nishiyama adjusted himself in his seat with the seriousness of someone facing an examination. He remained silent for a few moments and then, at last, with a firm voice, replied:

—To me, *Sensei*, more than a block... the first movement is an attack.

Funakoshi inclined his head slightly, encouraging him to develop the idea.

The young man continued:

—If I think of them as two separate movements—first defense, then attack—I feel I respond too slowly. In that case, the *tsuki* would be the only true strike, and the first gesture would be reduced to merely avoiding an

attack... perhaps blocking or redirecting a *mae-geri* aimed at the chest.

—Then how do you interpret it? —Funakoshi asked calmly.

—For me, the first “block” isn’t a defense at all, but an attack. I execute it as if striking the opponent’s thigh, and immediately link it to the *tsuki* to the chest. I conceive it as a single movement with two impacts. It’s... attacking the attack, if I may put it that way.

Funakoshi nodded slowly.

—That’s it, boy. The interpretation you’ve offered—that is the essence of a *kata*. Over time, each practitioner discovers his own meaning in every movement. That is its secret, its language. The *kata*, by itself, is nothing more than choreography. But when the one who practices it finds its application, the gesture ceases to be empty and becomes part of instinct. Then it no longer matters why the hand moves... because, when the moment comes, it simply will. Do you understand now?

Silence filled the car for a few moments, until a sincere voice broke it:

—Thank you, *Sensei*. Your explanation... I will never forget it.

The car turned onto a street with fewer piles of rubble. The afternoon pushed its way between buildings wounded by the war.

—*Ro-sensei*... and which of your two masters influenced you the most? —Hidetaka asked.

The old man let out a faint smile, as though that question had accompanied him all his life.

—I cannot choose, Hidetaka. It would be like asking a tree which of its roots gives it more life. From Asato I received rigor—the discipline of the spirit, the certainty that each step must be taken with full awareness. From Itosu I received clarity, patience with those who are just beginning. Together they gave me balance —the root and the branch, severity and compassion.

Silence filled the car. Outside, a group of barefoot children ran among the ruins with laughter that seemed to defy tragedy. Funakoshi followed them with his gaze, and his voice turned into a murmur:

—Itosu used to tell me that the art has no meaning if it cannot be transmitted. “*What good is your strength*

if you do not teach others to be strong?" he would repeat to me. And he was right.

Young Hidetaka, moved, asked in a low voice:

—Then... do we all need more than one teacher?

Funakoshi looked at him with tenderness.

—In life we have many teachers, even if we don't always call them that. Our parents are teachers. So are the school instructors, or the one at the *dōjō*. From each of them we learn something, but it is we who decide what to keep. What matters is learning to look from different angles.

The father, at the wheel, finally spoke:

—Then, *Sensei*, *Karate-dō* is, to a great extent, the union of those two ways of seeing.

—Exactly —Funakoshi replied—. Asato gave me the root; Itosu, the branch. I was merely the bridge that joined them.

The conversation continued with memories of nights spent repeating a single strike under the wavering light of an oil lamp, and of mornings when Itosu gathered the children in a dirt courtyard. They were not mere

technical anecdotes; they were lessons in life, principles that transcended the *dōjō*.

Hidetaka listened with brightened eyes. He understood—perhaps for the first time—that the karate he practiced was not the work of a single man, but of a chain of masters who had known how to give and receive at just the right moment.

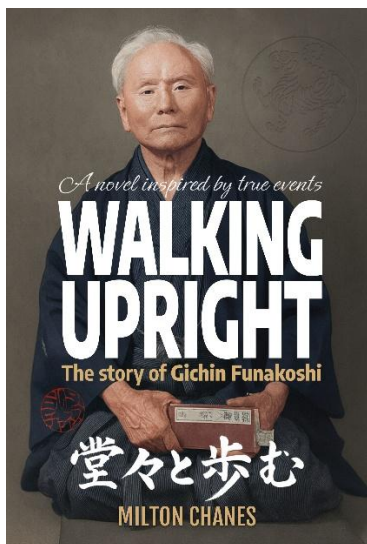
Funakoshi leaned back gently, turning his hat between his fingers like someone caressing a memory. His gaze lost in the window revealed that, while the car continued on its path, his thoughts had already embarked on another journey.

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