

WEAPONS

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Karate means "empty hand," so karate weapons may seem like a contradiction in terms. But though weapons are not obligatory in this martial art, their use can double your strength, enhance your coordination, and make you a superior empty-handed fighter.

"Okinawan karate and weapons are like brother and sister," explains karate and *kobudo* (Okinawan weapons) expert Tadashi Yamashita. "They complement each other."

The physical conditioning that weapons offer karate stylists has increased their popularity in recent years, and people are eager to learn more about their history and current applications. "You try different foods," says Yamashita, "you must also try different weapons to see which are best for you. If you don't try, how do you know?"

Following is a list of some of the more common weapons of karate training, including their histories and current and traditional uses. You're sure to find the one that suits you.

KAMA (SICKLE)

History: In 1470, when traditional weapons were confiscated by the Japanese military, Okinawan commoners utilized the kama as a fighting blade, often attaching a chain to the base for greater reach. This longer weapon was known as a kusarigama.

Traditional use: The kama was originally used for cutting grass. In close range fighting, the sickle could be used to trap an opponent's weapon, or for striking.

Current use: The kama is most commonly used in kata (forms) competition and demonstrations. The forms include circular movements which improve blocking and countering techniques.

NUNTE

History: Developed by Okinawan farmers, the multi-pronged nunte was usually placed on the end of a staff to form a spear, but it could also be thrown, or handled as a dagger or mace.

Traditional use: In its most basic form, the nunte was a fishing tool. As a dagger or part of a spear, the nunte's center prong was used for striking, while its arms could also catch and hold an opponent's weapon.

Current use: The nunte is now found most often in kata competitions and demonstrations, either in the hand or at the end of a staff.

BO (staff)

History: The bo is one of the five weapons systematized by the early Okinawan developers of the style known as te (hand). In feudal Japan it was part of the bugei (early Japanese martial arts) and was used by samurai, priests, and commoners alike. Its sixfoot length made it an apt weapon against swordsmen, disarming the opponent while allowing the user to remain at a safe distance.

Traditional use: The bo evolved from poles balanced across the shoulders to carry water or other loads. As a fighting instrument, it allowed locking and striking against a range of weapons.

Current use: Now part of the budo (martial ways), the bo is still used in kata performance. Physical conditioning with the bo improves balance and upper-body strength.

SAI

History: Present in Okinawan and other Asian weapon arsenals, the sai (pronged truncheon) was used to stab, block, trap and punch. Practitioners often carried a sai in each hand, and a "spare" at the belt. The weapon could also be thrown.

Traditional use: The sai is believed to have originated with the pitchfork. As a weapon, it was used in conjunction with various karate stances and techniques, and in defense against sword attacks.

Current use: With dulled points, the sai is now a karate training weapon. It tests accuracy in striking and quick block-and-counter techniques.

NAGINATA (reaping sword)

History: During the Edo period (1600-1808), women of the samurai class were the primary wielders of the naginata for self-protection. It could be used on horseback or on foot, and was part of the bujutsu (Japanese military arts).

Traditional use: The naginata probably originated as a weapon. The blade was used to slash with wide, circular movements, and the butt could block or knock opponents off balance.

Current use: Naginata-do (the way of the naginata) is still popular with Japanese women and is part of many academic athletic programs in Japan. National competitions are still held, and women often compete with naginata against men armed with bokken (wooden swords). Extremely strong wrists and forearms are necessary for this sport.

TONFA

History: The tonfa (side-handle baton) was developed as a weapon by the Okinawans, specifically for use in conjunction with karate. Two tonfa were often used simultaneously, and were very efficient against armed assailants.

Traditional use: Originally a bean or rice grinder, the tonfa's circular movements as a farm implement evolved into its rotating strikes as a weapon. The side of the tonfa was used for blocking, and the ends for direct punches.

Current use: Now an advanced karate training aid, the tonfa aids development of block-and-strike strategies and upper-body strength.

YARI (spear)

History: Used by men and women of the samurai class on foot and horseback, the yari has been part of Oriental weaponry for thousands of years. Many schools of sojutsu (the art of the spear) were formed throughout history, each teaching different methods of yari fighting.

Traditional use: Primarily a thrusting weapon, the yari existed in several forms and styles, including the pipe spear and three-bladed spear.

Current use: No competitive form of sojutsu has developed. Training extends only to yari kata, and these are not widely studied.

JO (short staff)

History: Noted swordsman Gonnosuke Muso developed the jo for competition against Musashi Miyamoto, Japan's greatest swordsman, in the late 16th century. Garnering victory only after cutting his bo to the length of a jo (three to four feet), Muso founded the shindo muso-ryu to train others in the weapon.

Traditional use: Less awkward than the bo, the jo focused on basic blocking and striking maneuvers.

Current use: Jodo (the way of the jo) is currently practiced in Japan and the United States. Competitions, including free sparring and kata demonstrations with the jo, exist within the study.

KATANA (traditional Japanese sword)

History: Developed after the bokken, the katana was the favored weapon of the samurai warriors and the most widely used Japanese sword. Drawn in a "sky-to-ground" manner, it was worn in the belt on the left side, edge upward.

Traditional use: Employed on foot or horseback as a thrusting weapon the katana was used in battle, competition and in ritual deaths.

Current use: The katana is now primarily a popular weapon for kata competition and demonstrations.

BOKKEN (wooden sword)

History: The bokken was a popular samurai training sword because it was safer and less expensive than a "live" blade. When used in competition it could be fatal, and samurai would often keep a bokken nearby while they slept, so intruders could be captured without spilling blood within the house.

Traditional use: The bokken was primarily used to practice blocking and entering techniques.

Current use: The bokken is still used in place of the katana (sword) for training, competition, and demonstrations.

TANTO (knife)

History: The samurai wore the tanto either alone, or with the tachi (long sword).

Traditional use: The tanto was used as a thrusting weapon in close combat, although it could also be thrown.

Current use: While tanto-jutsu (art of the dagger) is not widely practiced, the weapon can be used in kata demonstrations and competitions.

NUNCHAKU

History: Developed in the 17th century by Okinawans after the Japanese gained occupation of their land, the nunchaku (flail) was one of many harmless looking weapons implemented at the time. The two equal sections were originally held together by horsehair and could be used against armed or unarmed assailants.

Traditional use: The nunchaku was originally an agricultural tool used for threshing grain. As a weapon, it was used in conjunction with various stances and techniques. The sticks could be used for spearing or striking, and the chain could

choke, block, or trap.

Current use: The nunchaku is a popular weapon for demonstrations. It is also used as a weapon of self-defense by karate stylists and some law enforcement agencies.



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