

Simply put, karate means empty hands. Kobujitsu or Kobudo on the other hand is and Okinawan term for fighting with weapons. By walking into almost any martial arts school in the world, you will inevitably see a wall full of ancient style weapons that were originally not developed AS a weapon.

Early in the 1600s, Japan conquered the Ryukyu Islands whose main island is Okinawa. Okinawa is located some 300 miles south of the southernmost tip of the mainland of Japan. Fearing an over throw, the emperor of Japan forced the people of Okinawa to give up all weapons.

Thanks to trade, the nearness of China as well as the Shaolin monks and nuns who helped them, the Okinawans developed a means of self-protection by using common farm implements for weapons. Most of what are now traditional martial arts weapons are still used for farming to this day.

Nunchaku – “flail” Commonly called “nun chucks” or “chucks”, this is without doubt the most well known of the weapons. It is basically two sticks connected to each other by a string or chain. Their farming use was to beat the rice so it can be tossed on a large screen or piece of material to allow the wind to blow away the husks. The nunchaku can be used as both an offensive and defensive weapon by using them to strike, trap, jab, or choke an attacker.

Bo-“staff” The Bo is a long wooden staff for herding livestock, guiding boats or used as a way of carrying supplies in baskets. In this instance the Bo was placed across the shoulders and the baskets would hang from either side. Although there are two styles of the Bo, the average length of both is 6’ with a diameter of 3.5 inches. The Chinese Bo keeps an equal diameter along its entire length where as the Okinawan style tapers at each end. This tapering makes for a much more focused and affective strike. Regardless of the style, its ends are used to strike an opponent’s eyes, throat, and solar plexus of groin. It can also be used to block an attack as well as to sweep the feet. For those who are well versed in its use, a broom, mop, paint handle and any number of household items can make for an excellent stand in.

Tonfa- The Tonfa was developed as a handle for a grinder of rice in Japan and soybeans in Okinawa. The Tonfa is found to be affective when laid across the forearm as a way to block a sword or Bo attack. Tonfas are made of a hardwood such as oak, are approximately 17 inches long and have a 4.5 to 5 inch long handle near one end. The Tonfa is usually about 2 inches thick and has gained immense popularity among law enforcement agencies. The police issue PR-24 is carried by countless police officers as a nightstick and seen on television regularly.

Kama – A deadly, razor sharp sickle that has a half-moon shaped blade and wooden handle. The Kama is still used by farmers to cut rice and grass but seldom taught as a weapon due to its dangerous nature. The Kama is a

defensive weapon that was used against sword and Bo attacks. It can become deadly when used as an extension of the users hands. In hand to hand fighting, the Kama is used to block a punch or kick but as it does so, the sickle blade can slash deeply into the arm or leg. There have been reported cases where a wrist or other body part was actually severed during practice and training.

Sai- (pronounced sigh) The sai was developed for planting rice or vegetable seeds. It resembles a trident and has central, rounded or octagonal shaped steel blade approximately 16 inches long. On either side of the blade there are two prongs that are wrist guards. Sais can be used for a number of things such as stabbing, slashing, punching, blocking, and even throwing. It is believed that farmers who used the sai would carry three at a time. One sai for each hand and one was kept in the belt to throw if necessary. Legend states a strap of some sort was occasionally tied to the handle so the farmer could retrieve it.

Not all weapons found in a dojo started out as farm tools.

Jo – “short staff” Developed by Muso Gonnosuke after suffering a defeat by swordsman Miyamoto Musashi in the early 1600s. It is made of hard wood and is 4 feet in length. This shorter length allowed close fighting with possibilities the longer Bo couldn't allow. The jo can be used to choke, pin, lock, and throw an opponent. Years after his defeat, Muso once again faced Musashi and came out of the match the victor.

Manrikigusari- This weapon is a chain, which is usually 12 inches long. It has weights on each end that resemble handles. A samurai by the name of Masaki developed the weapon as a way to kill an opponent without bloodshed. This bloodless killing was important because it was sacrilege to spill blood on palace grounds. The manrikigusari can be used to block, choke, strike, and throw an opponent.

Shuriken – One of the most popular of weapons is also known as the ninja throwing star. Initially developed to provide a distraction and not a weapon of attack. Regardless of Hollywood magic, shurikens can injure but not penetrate deeply enough to kill. The most popular of shuriken styles come in four to twelve points per star.

Beginning students are often disappointed by a sensei's refusal to teach them the use of these weapons. Patience is hard to come by when told that these “farm tools” are only allowed to advanced students often over the rank of brown belt. What they don't realize is that these same tools are what the Okinawans used to fight the tyranny of the samurai warriors in a sense of self preservation. To many they are simply wall decorations instead of the deadly weapons they actually are.