


Snow Cranes : An Investigation of Cultural Dislocation  
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to the required standard




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ABSTRACT

As a result of the ever increasing exchange of goods and information between nations and peoples of the world intercultural contact is becoming much more common and accepted. One result is that individuals are seeking new experiences, travelling to different countries and living for extended periods in cultures very different from those they were raised in.

The purpose of this research is to present an account of one individual's long term experience of a foreign culture. The result is a chronicle outlining the participant's perception and reassessment of self, academics, culture and cultural dislocation and his resulting attempts to readjust, and re-enter his original cultural framework.

The work takes the form of an autobiographical memoir in novelized form, using interpretive research as its methodology. It derives important observations from the experiences of the individual applicable to generalized human themes. The last chapter of the work deals with these implications.

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# **Snow Cranes**

by Perry Foster

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	iv
The Beginning of Softness.....	1
June 1998 .....	1
Chapter 1: The Book of My Father.....	5
June 5th, 1944: Southeastern England.....	6
June 8th, 1944: Caen, France .....	9
August 1944: The Falaise Gap.....	11
1947: Edmonton.....	14
1971: Lantzville.....	15
Chapter 2: The Book of the Warrior.....	21
Hardwood Floors .....	23
September 1985: Outside the School of Karate Master Masatoshi Fukuda.....	29
May 1986.....	31
Mould on the Walls, Cockroaches in Your Bed.....	33
Winky Goes Down .....	37
Keiko.....	43
Izumi Tamagawa .....	47
May 1965.....	48
Enoshima.....	51
The Soft Way .....	54
A Hint of Healing.....	58
Entering a New World.....	60
Chapter 3: The Book of the Healer.....	62
1993: Inokashira Park.....	62
1936: Guangdong Province, China.....	79
The Monastery of the Yellow Dragon.....	83
1949.....	85
Shibuya, 1993: The Dojo of Wang Shu Chin.....	87
Push Hands.....	92
Yamamoto .....	95
Drinking From the Pool of the Yellow Dragon .....	104
Opening the Temple Door .....	118
Becoming a Scholar Warrior: The Path of the Dragon Heart.....	119
A Sea of Words .....	122
Chapter 4: The Book of the Wanderer.....	127
China, 1967: Guangdong Province A World Gone Mad.....	130
An Old Woman Abbess .....	136
Searching for a Master.....	138
A Carefully Worded Letter .....	142
In the Gateway of the Wu Lin .....	145

The Gate of the Middle Kingdom.....	147
Toads and Mosquito Netting.....	155
We Meet Sifu Chow Kai Lung.....	158
March 1994: The Hung Mong Dong.....	169
The Base of the Temple: We Train in the Classical Way .....	170
Climbing a Mountain.....	178
Reaching for Softness.....	182
A Gift from Wong Fei Hung .....	189
Rats in Back Alleys.....	193
In the Temple of Ming Na .....	197
A Startling Reflection.....	200
The Sword of the Dragon Pool.....	203
Snow Cranes.....	215
Chapter 5: Canada, the Once Known Land .....	219
Chapter 6: In the Kwoon of the Human Heart .....	225
Victoria, 1998.....	225
Sipping Tea in Remembrance.....	233
The Hall of the Twin Dragons .....	243
Nyumon: Entering at the First Gate.....	246
The Unlacing of Armour .....	246
Entering at the Second Gate: Nibanme No Mon Ni Haeiru .....	250
November 1998.....	250
In the Courtyard of Trees .....	253
The Search for Self.....	255
Fist of Warrior, Paper of Scholar.....	262
Glimpsing a Formless Void.....	272
The Third Gate: Entering the Courtyard of Meaning .....	275

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## Dedication

To my wife whose unfailing support, love, courage and encouragement is the true  
inspiration for *Snow Cranes*.

*A wife of noble character who can find?*

*She is worth far more than rubies.*

*Her husband has full confidence in her*

*and lacks nothing of value.*

Proverbs 31: 10-11

## The Beginning of Softness

*June 1998*

I watched from my window as a misty rain fell. Here, looking out into the street from the study of my new home, I thought of the many days and nights of soft rain I had experienced as a child in Lantzville and the countless Asian rains I had felt over the previous decade. It was late June. In Japan it was “Tsuyu,” the rainy season. For the previous six-and-a-half years I had heard the rain fall on crowded Tokyo train stations, modern Japanese convenience stores, ancient temples, old and worn martial arts training halls, and felt it as a soft spray of constant drizzle falling in densely packed streets.

Now the setting was different. I had returned to Canada and my boyhood home on Vancouver Island. And as the rain had washed me clean in Japan, it cleansed me here as well, and pulled me into the rich smells and memories of my life. I loved and needed the rain and its softness. I had never known a time when rain had not been present, nor lived in a place where there was not abundant water.

As my thoughts drifted, I thought of water’s qualities. It carries away dirt, cleanses all things. It gives life, but can sweep away hills or, over time, wear away mountains. It is powerful in its softness, yet you can pass your hand through it effortlessly. It conforms to every shape and yet can penetrate the hardest object. It is softness incarnate. On an impulse, I reached above my desk and brought down my copy of the *Tao Te Ching*. As I watched the rain gently fall on the windowpane before me, I turned to my two favourite quotations and read them: Verse seventy six : “ Thus whoever

is stiff and inflexible is a disciple of death. Whoever is soft and flexible is a disciple of life,” (Mitchell, 1988, p. 76 ) and again in verse 36 “ The soft overcomes the hard. The slow overcomes the fast.” (Mitchell, 1988, p. 36)

I had gone on a journey of discovery to Asia, and had struggled to progress from hard to soft, to reach for openness and avoid rigidity, and to open myself up to new ways of being. The journey continued, even now, in an endless cycle of self-discovery. Now I was a teacher and a graduate student, but I had once been a traveller, healer, and martial arts disciple. The circumstances of my life were always changing and with them my identity.

After nearly a decade, and two sojourns in Asia, I was coming to terms with how much I had changed through an eventful and demanding life. I had left Canada as one person and returned as another. Now, through the graduate work I was doing, I was engaged in a struggle to understand what those changes meant. I had stripped bare my previously held assumptions about myself and who I was, and through it all, the progression and the themes were the same: from hard to soft, from rigidity to openness, from clenching and holding tightly, to letting go and accepting.

I opened the text again and found another quotation in verse nine : “Keep sharpening your knife and it will blunt. Chase after money and security and your heart will never unclench. Care about people’s approval and you will be their prisoner. Do your work, then step back. The only path to serenity.” ( Mitchell, 1988, p. 9 ).That, too, was true and part of the struggle I was going through. After coming back from Asia, I noticed that North America was obsessed with acquisition, with the grasping and holding

of possessions, status, and power. Yet I had now become part of that society, and had many of those same possessions. It was the way of hardness and rigidity, the same rigidity the *Tao Te Ching* spoke of. As the rain began to fall more heavily, I asked myself how I could avoid becoming rigid and a disciple of death. How could I balance the hard and soft and reach harmony?

“In order to reach the truth, seek softness.” I had once been told that by a martial arts master. Now I needed to look for it in my daily life and in my academic career. My graduate school studies were entering a critical stage, and I was finding it very difficult to go from my hard and rigid ideas about the academy to a softer more open approach, one that would allow me to progress as I needed and wanted to. North American life was pressing in on me, as I felt the inexorable weight of the need to acquire in order to justify the events of my life. I was becoming more rigid, not less.

I got up from my chair and picked up the cup of tea I had made for myself. What would be the vehicle that would help me reach softness and unclench my heart? As I drank the rain pattered heavily on the window, fed by a wind that threw it in gusts against my home. I thought of the events of my life, of the martial arts teachers and healers, of the holy men and warriors, of the mentors and adversaries, of the scholarly teachers and spiritual friends. Somehow the key lay in that life. Somehow, in the sum of those experiences lay the way to softness and the balance I sought. If I was going to produce academic research of any value and answer the questions I had about my own identity, the site of those answers and progress would be in my life. I breathed deeply

three times, in tribute to my teachers, and my thoughts drifted to a time long ago on a summer day.

## Snow Cranes

### Chapter 1: The Book of My Father

It is the scent of wet cedar I remember most. Wet cryptomeria cedar, the smell of all things exotic and distant, the smell of enlightened masters and zendo halls and fierce nio guardians at the entrances to temples. I swim in the Georgia Straight and come up sputtering in the South China Sea. I lie on the sand; it is hardpacked in the early August sun. I am hardpacked, with a “six pack” abdominal section and whipcord rivulets of muscle. Water streams down my forearms; trails of sand cling to my legs; the cords of thin, but well-defined muscle stand out in relief on my broadening back.

I look at the sky and wonder how much feldspar and mica I would have to collect from the sand to be able to write the word *no mind* in Chinese characters. I would use them on the cover of a text on the martial arts, a text I would write after many years of study in a monastery in China. Lying in the sand, I can imagine how it would be. It would be like the movie *55 Days at Peking*, but I would not be Charleton Heston. I would be the young Boxer rebel who could dodge any sword cut, the one who twirls his sword so deftly and contemptuously, then offers it to Heston, daring him to cut him.

I am up from the sand in a liquid move. Springing with each step, the balls of my feet barely touching the hot ground, I run barefoot up the sandbar to my waiting ten-speed. In twenty minutes I have cycled home and, casting the bike aside, go to the privacy of my room before my parents can discover me. I have Mas Oyama’s book *What is Karate?* in my hands before I reach the old bed. The book is everything to me. Pouring

over its double-page shots of karate masters splintering six pine boards with a single blow, I wonder why everyone doesn't love this as I do, why everyone does not want to be a martial arts master.

I am a different kind of boy. My classmates convert Bic pens into hash pipes. I convert Douglas fir branches into Japanese swords. I am fourteen, and while Led Zeppelin plays in everyone else's minds, the words of Inazo Nitobe play in mine: "For there is no beauty in the world of men like that of rectitude." I dream of being a kobushi, a warrior of old Japan, of having the kind of courage personified by the heroes of the classical work *Taiheiki*, who unhesitatingly laid down their lives for their emperor Go-Daigo. It is a boy's world, the world of a fourteen year-old.

#### ***June 5th, 1944: Southeastern England***

Dog Troop Charlie squadron loads its supplies and munitions into the landing craft on the Devonshire coast. Fit and well fed, these men of the 23rd regiment Royal Canadian Artillery carry out one last check on their tanks. They are anxious, though no one wants to show it. In a few hours they will be heading toward their destination in Normandy: Juno beach. There, with the British on their left and the Americans on their right flank, they will take part in the greatest invasion in history. None of them really understand it. They understand their mothers and fathers, their girls left behind at the last dance, that it will soon be harvest time back home, and that the crops in Carrot River are finally good after the great dry years of the thirties. They understand what it means to wait for a streetcar at minus twenty degrees centigrade, to dodge a fist in a back alley in Toronto, to come in the back way to a speakeasy in Montreal, to survive by their wits.

They understand these things, but they have no idea of what lies ahead of them. All their hopes lie in the reed-thin man coming up the gangway toward them.

Nicknamed “Beau Geste” after the tough sergeant in the old movie classic, and sometimes called “Pop” instead of “Sarge” the way he ought to be, he is smaller than all of them and at least thirteen years older. All of five feet four inches with black hair prematurely receding into a widow’s peak, he is almost frail compared to the 19- and 20-year-olds under his command. All the same, there is not one of them who can outrun him in physical training, beat him in a game of chance or outdance him at the jitterbug. They respect him, and they are worried because he looks tired and wrung out. He coughs once and puts out his cigarette, grinding it under his boot to make sure it is out.

His full name is Oswald Dawson Foster. The “Oswald” has caused him endless pain, and now it is either “Ossie” or “Duke.” Anything else means a quick right or worse from the former flyweight champion of Toronto, the man who knocked down “Frenchie” Boulanger in the Toronto Civic Arena. But all of that is a world away. Now the bright blue eyes look out from under the beret, and he sees the four tanks under his command, sees the anxious faces of the boys who are thinking the unthinkable about themselves, and wonders what he could possibly tell them that would help war make sense to them. He can’t think of anything, so he just tells them that they have all they need and that they are the best equipped troops in the best army in the world.

They listen patiently while the wind tears at them from the English Channel. It could be a no go if the weather is bad enough. This whole thing could be part of the rumored feint, and maybe they won’t have to go at all. These are the hopes that tear at

them, gnaw at their vitals while they know from “Pop’s” face that they are going, and that that is all there is to it. When he is finished, he looks at them for a moment. The question hangs, and Sergeant Foster does not know anything more to say beyond what he has already told them, so he wishes them well and tells them he will see them tomorrow. There are nods all around, the odd smile, and then they are dismissed.

He is tired after having spent all night teaching American officers how to waterproof their tanks. He could feel their resentment—captains and majors taking orders from a Canadian sergeant—but they were told in no uncertain terms that he was the boss, the orders coming from well above them in the chain of command. The American officers make him think of Eva, his ex wife, and of Pat, the daughter he loves. They are somewhere in upstate New York, unaware of all this. It is a newsreel to them soon to be viewed in some warm theater off Park Avenue with the neurosurgeon Pat will soon call “Daddy.” If he could, he would take it all back, make it better, but all of that is impossible in the mid 1940s, a world where he could not even mention divorce, where he had had to tell everyone that Eva had died.

Suddenly he is thinking of Yaeckel, the pimply faced kid from Carrot River, Saskatchewan. What will happen to him? Will he be alive in twenty-four hours? He pushes that thought aside and looks out at the coast. He is numb as he lights another cigarette. For some reason, all he can think about is riding. It has been only a few years since his commanding officer in the horse guards, Jack Eaton, outfitted them all with the money from his father’s department store, and they won the Nordiamond cup. He says

good-bye to that in his mind, good-bye to the silver riding crop he and his team won, now in his sister's living room. Good-bye, just in case. This is real. This is war.

*June 8th, 1944: Caen, France*

Yaeckel is screaming. He can't make himself heard over the artillery that is making the world an inferno of noise. He is trying to shout firing orders to Beau Geste. They have come in over the radio from the observation post, and he is shocked to realize that he is thinking of Ozzie as just another soldier like him, not as his sergeant. It is Ozzie who is looking down at him from the hatch of the tank. Ozzie, whose face is caked in mud and blood from a shrapnel nick. It is Ozzie who has gotten them this far. It has been three days since they have slept, three days since they met the German 34th division. All of the original men of the squadron are alive; one, Pennington, from Owen Sound, was wounded and sent back to the beaches, and home. The rest envy him. Let it be me, they say. Let it be me who gets it in an arm or leg. I want to go home.

But they will go on. Ozzie is a haggard mess. A looted rifle from a German corpse hangs around his neck. He has learned that theirs are better, lighter, more accurate, and cool more quickly. In three days he has gone from a thirty-three-year-old man who has never seen a corpse to an ancient berserker screaming out orders in the nick of time to save the lives of the 19-year-olds around him. He has seen an old woman crushed in the street by a Sherman tank, a British officer decapitated by a Waffen SS assault trooper, whom he himself later killed with his sidearm. He has seen fields of dead bodies and seen the American air force destroy whole columns of German troops. He is gone.

The Oswald Foster who won Charleston contests is gone. The "Duke" Foster who had long drunken conversations with Billie Bishop in the Toronto Badminton and Racquet club is gone. The "Ossie" Foster who once warmed up before a squash game with the Aga Khan is gone. They are all gone, though he does not know it. He is acting on instinct and training, getting by on his last reserves of strength. He is an animal, shocked and afraid. What he will be is unknown to him. What he was is barely remembered.

The officers keep giving them orders. Smart enough to know the good ones from the bad, the enlisted men watch the British carry out their instructions like automatons and get cut down. The Americans depend on their equipment and air support. But the Canadians are different. They are frontier kids. No one can tell a Canadian kid to do something that makes no sense and expect him to follow orders blindly. As a result, they gain a reputation as savage fighters. Montgomery keeps them in the thick of things, never letting them retire from the fighting. They are his shock troops, and Ossie is in the middle of it.

He feels perpetually heightened. Every colour is brighter to him and every action more intense than normal. Movements are sharper, more real. He notices countless details woven into larger events. He has never felt more alive.

But he is ill. The events of the last seventy two hours have sickened him. It is a kind of sickness that cannot be cured with a few days' leave, although he thinks it can. It is a sickness of life, for already the questions have begun to form for him, to take hold of his consciousness, to bore into his soul. He will never be the same, although he has no time to realize it now. Ironically, it is death that has awakened him to life.

Finally they are ordered to pull back. Ossie orders his tanks to the rear and the service officer there does him a favour. He can see the fatigue in Ossie and his men, the bone-weary tiredness that tells him they will not survive. He is wiser than the officers and signs the requisition slip for tank repair, though there is nothing wrong with the vehicles. Ossie and the boys in his care sink into unconsciousness on the treads of their tanks. It is far from over, but, for now, they have a few hours of rest.

*August 1944: The Falaise Gap*

He is getting ready for breakfast, grateful for the break. They have taken Antwerp, liberated Holland, and pushed on into the heart of France. War is now his world. Ossie has sent Yaeckel and the rest back to the tanks to check things out. There is no point in keeping them out here now, on the edge of the forward positions. They will just be exposed to more danger. He hasn't lost a man and doesn't intend to now. All those kids are coming back, and that is all there is to it. He will see to it personally, and he will be having dinner at Yaeckel's home when all of this is over.

The fifteenth armoured division is providing support for them. They are lined up for chow near a farmhouse, where the supply trucks have finally caught up with them. Ossie can see them as he draws nearer. It would be nice to get a hot breakfast for a change. He thinks that maybe he should call the boys back, let them in on this. They are due for a leave soon, but the orders are overdue. They have been living off the land for days, and a hot meal would be great.

He starts walking toward the nearest lieutenant to ask permission to join them. There is an extended hand and the beginnings of a smile when the man's face bursts into crimson blossoms. He crumples, a lifeless sack, and up the line, his men join him. Twenty-three of them are killed as enemy troops open up on them from the rooftop of a nearby farmhouse. Ossie dives for cover, rolls, and jumps headlong through the window of a nearby shed. He is alone, his heart beating madly, every sense in him straining to hear clues of where the Germans might be. At the same time, he is trying to think of a way to get back to his own troops and warn them. Trapped in the shed, he is certain to be discovered and killed out of hand or caught in the inevitable crossfire between the fifteenth and the Panzer troops who have ambushed them.

He talks to himself again and again, willing himself to be calm, to do things step by step, telling himself that it is the only way to survive. He leans up against the shed wall, sweating, and breathing heavily. He has decided to make for the nearest clump of trees, circle back, and find the tanks. Pulling back the charging handle on his Schmeizer, he leaps out of the low-lying window and heads for the trees, about ten yards away. There is an immediate response, and he is chased by bullets tearing up the turf around him, but he makes it.

For a moment he leans against the nearest tree. Holding the Schmeizer vertically in front of him, he counts and pleads, saying please, over and over again. It is time to step out. He knows this, knows that he can't stay there, or they will outflank him and he will die, stitched to the tree. He moves to his left, and bullets spray the branches above him. Trying desperately to get a mark on their direction, he decides to run the five or six feet to

the next tree. Panting, and terrified, he makes it amidst a new hail of bullets, and now has a fix on his opponent. He lets loose a burst in the direction of enemy fire, then waits.

There is nothing, no reply to his shots, and he knows he is in trouble. Whoever is firing on him is experienced, knows enough not to fire in knee-jerk fashion, but to wait and figure out what his patterns are. It is the strangest feeling. The trees are greener, the sound of wind clearer than it would ever have been back home in “normal” life. He begins to step out, and the earth at the base of the tree explodes, torn apart by automatic rifle fire. Pieces of bark spray around him, and he hugs his weapon until it is over, then steps out from the tree and waits. Fully visible to his enemy, he stands until the man steps out again, then cuts him down. It is over in a second, the soldier’s body crumpling in a horrid display of organs as he is rent in half.

Running forward in a half crouch, Ossie reaches the body and turns it over. When he does, his breath is taken away. He looks at the man’s decorations—Poland, Stalingrad, Greece, North Africa—he has survived all of them, except for this last engagement in a nameless clump of forest in France, where he is killed by a Canadian from a city he doesn’t even know. Suddenly the world shatters, and Ossie disappears. There is no one there that anyone would recognize, just a sobbing shell of someone who once thought what he did made sense. Now there is no one, no one at all, just a helpless, crying man who will never be the same.

In a moment his troops are there, asking him if he is okay, but the man crouching at their feet will not let them touch him, and will not let them touch the body of the dead soldier beneath him. He is empty and shattered.

All of his boys return to Canada safely. Miraculously, none of them are killed, and they all go home to the families and lovers left behind in what seems a lifetime ago. He is wounded in the thumb, and it will be a reminder for him forever. Stiff and unmoving, it will be a momento of the great conflict that split his life in two. His eardrums are blown out in the last great push for the Rhine, and, because of it, he will always be a little hard of hearing. A small puckered scar on his left chest will also serve to remind him, like the thumb, that he has been transformed, come out of the painful chrysalis of the most horrifying experience a man can have, and in a kind of reverse metamorphosis to that of a caterpillar, become uglier.

When he returns to Canada, he will train to be a paratrooper and become part of a special forces group known as "Command Six." He is still a soldier, keyed up and ready to fight at a moment's notice, possessed of a combatant's mind, the mind of a warrior killer. He is scheduled to go to Kentucky and train with the American special forces when the news comes that the atomic bomb has been dropped on Japan. He is suddenly without a war and, within a year, volunteers for the Israeli war of independence. But that conflict ends too, and he decides to enter civilian life far too early, well before he is ready for it, or it for him.

*1947: Edmonton*

Ossie returns to civilian life and tries to hold down a job, but it is difficult. There are too many questions, too many horrible queries that have no answer. "How can it be that people do such things to each other?" "What is this thing called life?" and "What is it

all about?" One day the power of these questions comes to Ossie so strongly that he can no longer push it aside. It happens as he is sitting on the bed in his room. He is reading as a Cessna flies overhead. Suddenly the fabric of things tears apart. The Messerschmidt careens down towards him strafing as it goes, and he is back in the horror. He dives into a slit trench, rolling for cover. Instantly his Schmeiser is in his hand, and he lets go a burst skyward. Leaping up, he is moving once again, looking for the cover of his tank, firing as he moves forward, giving cover to his boys. When it is over, he is under his bed, shaking, covered in sweat, screaming for Yaeckel to get the tank moving and get out of there.

The landlady finds him that way, and tells him to pack up his things and get the hell out. He leaves the next day and quits his job at the King Edward Hotel within hours. He is in need of a cure, and he knows it. In 1947 there are no counselling agencies, no government-supported programs to help him repair himself. He is just another vet. But this veteran has a knowledge of something more and thinks he knows where to go for it. He spends a year alone in the forests of Northern Ontario before he comes back to the world others call "normal," and when he does, he is not the same man. He has gained wisdom and perspective and is ready to enter the world again.

### *1971: Lantzville*

I hit the mattress in a single bone-jarring move. Dust rises up from it in small clouds, and I am left with the smell of the second-hand fabric in my nostrils. Dad extends his hand to help me, and I am on my feet again. It is my sixteenth birthday, and I am taller

than him by six inches. We are practicing the unarmed combat moves he has been teaching me. He is still good at them, but I am careful not to go too fast. He is sixty now, and twenty-five years away from the forest dweller and newly discharged war veteran. I am not sure he knows this, and I do not want to hurt him.

I love him desperately. To me he is everything good and male. He is my hero, a wonderful man. He has given me his flawed Zen Buddhism, and I love him for it. We are poor, but I do not mind. I feel complete in his world. It is a boy's dream, a world of heroic impulses and high thoughts. I have been duped, but it is a pleasant misdemeanor. For himself, my father has created a world that is comfortable. He has married again, to someone twenty three years younger, and has three children by her, of which I am the oldest. My two sisters inhabit a different world, one that does not include the way of the warrior.

Since my early childhood, we have talked about everything and at the same time, nothing. I know a lot about Zen and speculative philosophy but nothing about the practical world. I cannot make a birdhouse or repair a car. I don't know how to handle tools or a hockey stick, but I can talk about the sixth patriarch of Zen or the *Tao Te Ching*. Little League is unknown to me, but I can tell you everything about the Greco-Persian Wars or the sterling qualities of the men of the early Roman republic. I am part of my father's world, with no world of my own.

In the seething world of adolescence I am beginning to chafe, but not enough to rebel and hurt the demigod who raised me. I want so much to please him, to make him proud of me, but at the same time, I am beginning to wonder, as all boys my age do, who

this is for, me or him? It is hard to figure out where these new feelings come from. I have begun to dislike playing chess with him for the first time since he taught it to me eleven years before. I play for him now, embryonically aware that it is not for me. There is love, resentment, pain, and the tangled fabric of feeling lying on the borderland of hate. I am confused.

He tells me to get up, and practice again. I oblige him, but my mind is on this evening. Tonight is the night I attend my first authentic karate class. It has been advertised in the Nanaimo Daily Free Press and on posters around town, and I am excited about it. Pictures of Mas Oyama run through my mind. I have no idea how important this day will be for me, or how far it will take me. I only know that I have been waiting for this day forever and that the three years of practicing on my own without a teacher will be coming to an end.

I jump up from the mattress, and Dad tells me not to forget what he has taught me. I mumble that I won't, but I am already a little amused. I know that we will not be practicing his moves in karate class. It is time for someone else to step into his place or for another kind of growth to occur. I am not sure which. How can you love someone so much, feel hatred for them, worship them, be amused by them, and feel you never want to leave their world, all at the same time?

That evening, Dad and I jump into the '62 Valiant and head for the school gym where the first practice will take place. I go in my street clothes, being poor, knowing no better, and having nothing else. I have an old copy of Black Belt magazine with me and pour over it in the car. Dad is talking to me about D. T. Suzuki and his time at Enkakuji

near Kamakura. I can hear him, but we have had this talk before. I am good at skimming the surface of what he says, of not minding it when he speaks of what the “Zens” say, knowing that it is “Zen patriarchs” or “Zen people” or even “Zen men” and not “Zens.” There is a pause as the aging car trundles along, and I glance at him, my world, and see a beauty in the aging skin and blue eyes I have not seen before. I am caught in the vortex of emotion, and love him desperately.

When we get to the gym, I can hardly contain myself. Already there are people there, a few dressed in the white uniforms that I have seen in my magazines, most dressed like me in street clothes or gym wear. I mill about, a shy adolescent in the midst of adults. Although I am excited, I am also intimidated. There are men here in their late twenties and thirties, some even in their forties, who have decided to give this art a try. Karate has not yet become a well-known thing and still has an air of mystery about it. But I am well acquainted with it. I know the basic terms and what karate is; that there are forms like set routines, that they have names, that there are different kinds of karate, from different countries—Tae Kwon Do from Korea and styles based on the great Japanese masters, like Oyama. I know what the basics are and how karate differs from the other fighting arts, such as judo, aikido, and sumo. I know these things in the same way that my father knows Zen, at a distance, through a looking glass, scratching the itch through my shoe, but I do not know what it means to actually practice karate.

Dad takes a chair on the gym stage and watches me. Pride beams from him. It is both embarrassing and gratifying, and I turn from him to look for the instructor. Though frightened and more than a little shy, I walk toward the small group of men clustered

around him. An informal question and answer session is taking place, males jockeying for position, trying to figure out how tough this guy might be. It is the early seventies and something of the bravado and toughness of the fifties remains. Some of the men grew up in that time and carry with them the formula of success they learned as adolescents. There are more than a few ducktails and crewcuts.

They frighten me, but I walk toward them. I can remember a quote about courage being the conquest of fear and not its absence. I take comfort from this and draw closer to the circle. I cannot yet see the instructor, only the bigger men on the outside of the group, and this puzzles me. Where is he? Why can't I see him?

When I finally push my way in, I am shocked. There, in the middle, is a short man with a barrel chest. He does not look extraordinary. If anything, he looks banal. He is short, about five feet four inches. As I draw closer, I notice that the others have left him a distance, a zone, as if they can sense the power of his spirit. I feel it, too, and wait until most of them have asked their questions before asking mine. It is a simple one: What kind of forms do you do in this school? What are their names? He looks at me for a moment, the rough face and penetrating stare making my heart beat fast. He answers that they do the Heians and then Bassai Dai. I am instantly disappointed. I had wanted to do Kyokushinkai, Mas Oyama's style. This is Shotokan, by comparison, plain and simple. There will be no ice or stone breaking here. In my world of self-defined martial arts, I feel that I will have to settle for less.

After answering a few more questions, he asks me if I am going to train that night. I answer that I will just watch. For a moment he fixes me with a stare that I will learn

later is one of disappointment, then turns to start the class. I walk back up to the stage to sit beside my father. What happens next will set the pattern for my life for decades. For I will end up practicing the martial arts for the rest of my life.

When the class begins and the warm-up exercises are done, I see authentic karate for the first time. The gaps in book learning are filled. I can see why things are done as they are. I quickly lose the desire to learn Kyokushinkai and want to do this form of Shotokan. It is real. I am seeing it, and it is not still photos or drawings in a book. It does not have the remote quality of Zen or my version of karate. It is here and I love it, knowing then that I want to do it for the rest of my life. What is more, it is mine. The book of my father has been closed, and the book of budo, the way of the warrior begins.

## Chapter 2: The Book of the Warrior

“Bushido I have found out, lies in dying.”

The Hagakure, or “Book of Fallen Leaves”

Karate becomes more than something I do in my spare time. In the dojo, the place of practice, there is purity, a meeting of fear, an intensity that comes from the ritual meeting of death. It is more than normal life. I throw myself into it with a fervour that borders on a dangerous mania. I have difficulty developing friendships, cannot talk to girls, have never been on a date, and am terribly shy. Yet on the hardwood floor of the dojo, I move with a grace that astonishes my instructor. I pick up the forms instantly and have a feel for them that can't be explained. I live in the world of the martial arts and, because of this, skip belt levels and defeat all the grown men in the dojo in both forms and fighting, scoring points with effortless technique.

I make the local papers, win tournaments, fight and win in Vancouver and Seattle, and become well known as “the karate guy.” All this on the outside. On the inside, there are equal parts pain and anguish. Something is not right. For a two week period I barely sleep. The insomnia culminates in a ghastly nightmare in which I am being killed by a ninja who forces a tube down my throat and blows poison into me. I am terrified, and wake up in the early morning hours covered in sweat. Finally, on the fifteenth day, exhausted, I find sleep. To ease the pain, I retreat further into the world of budo, the way

of the warrior, and the samurai ethic becomes my whole world. So, too, does *Kyohan Karate Do*, the master text of the Shotokan style. I swim in the martial way.

One of my dojo mates expresses it by saying, “Yeah, well, we do karate, Perry, but you BELIEVE!” It is meant as a kind of compliment, but comes out as a warning. I believe too much. I am sinking into it and can no longer see other viewpoints. The world of normal social relations disappears, and only karate remains. But there is also much good in what I do. I love karate and budo. It is giving me something, a purpose and a devotion, but I am caught between two cultures, the material one I am growing up in, and the imaginary one to which I am committed. The tension between them tears at me, and I pay a terrible price. Like my father before me, there are deep questions gnawing at me, but I cannot articulate them, and only know that I am unhappy. I do not fit in, but I do not understand why. I reject the world around me, but, at the same time, long to fit into it. Who am I?

I can't answer this question, am terrified of even asking it, but need the answer as a way back to the world of normal North American life. The skills and viewpoints my father has given me have made me unique. This has the tension of truth in it, the weight of undeniability. At the same time, holes have begun to appear in the world he has created. Between my sixteenth and seventeenth year, the images are ripped apart, and my concept of my father deteriorates from a heroic warrior mystic to a man who cannot get more than a series of minimum-wage jobs. As I see upper middle-class homes and the wealth of my dojo mates, the professional jobs, and their wider perspectives, I begin to judge him. It is not fair, but I do it anyway.

I did not see the old woman crushed by the tank, the fields of bodies, the German veteran cut in half. One day I will realize that he was capable of remarkable gentleness and compassion, that because he had these qualities, he followed the double-edged sword of the warrior—terrible power and martial spirit lying over deep compassion and gentleness.

But at the time, I am seventeen and cannot understand any of this. If I recognize anything, it is, at best, vaguely. At seventeen I am trying to become the perfect samurai. To do that, I need a foil, someone unlike my father. In my teenage thinking, I replace one father with another. John McDonald, the short stocky instructor I met on the night of my sixteenth birthday, is the perfect foil for my philosophical father. He teaches a rough and tumble form of Shotokan I see as forging me into a warrior machine. I love it and make terrific progress. In one year I go from white belt to brown. I have found a world where I feel at home.

### *Hardwood Floors*

“Karate ni sente nashi: In karate there is no first offense.”

McDonald pummels me mercilessly. We are practicing jyu ippon kumite, a kind of semi-free sparring. Before I can complete the punch, he intercepts me. His side thrust kick lifts me off the ground. I am fit and strong and take the force of his kick, locking my body against the raw power of his technique. His kick finishes, and as he retracts, he lets

me go. I continue forward, the initial momentum of my punch carrying me onward until I rest in the final second of my technique.

The rest of the karate club claps. We are training in preparation for my first degree black belt exam. It has been three years since I first walked into the dojo. The sixteen year old is gone, and a nineteen year old stands in his place. I am swift and strong, full of the optimistic power of youth. The dojo is still my home, the centre of my universe, but I have broadened since those first days. I am going to college now and have a girl friend. I have met people, socialized, and McDonald has helped me in this. He is full of quips and jokes, sardonic remarks, worldly wise, and street smart. He loves me like a second father, and it makes me feel proud to do well in front of him.

There is satisfaction in making my father proud as well. It is still difficult. I am confused about how I feel about his world. But on the one hand, there is pride. I do not think it is particularly bad to be different or to think differently. Underneath, there is the hidden knowledge that a life half-lived is a life half-wasted. My father knew this, and in my heart, I know it too. I cannot admire his inability to be practical, but I can see his wisdom. It is not hard to see that he does not fit the mould, but it is hard to understand the world he belongs to. As I prepare for my first degree black belt, all of these things come into focus.

In karate there is never a time like that before your shodan exam. The first degree black belt is entry into adulthood. In Japanese *shodan* means “first step” and is considered the beginning. Everything before this is preparation, and without attaining this level, you have not committed yourself and are not taken seriously.

Among Westerners, the black belt is considered the end of the journey. In the Western way of thinking, once you have attained it you have accomplished your goals and need go no further. You are a black belt. Nothing could be further from the truth. You are nothing, but you are now beyond the distinctions of the coloured belts and have entered the world of the “yudansha” or black belts. It is impossible to tell a black belt’s level from his or her belt. It is only possible to tell it from what he or she does. A good first degree black belt can beat a mediocre, unfocused, or uncommitted third degree. And there is more.

Because you defeat someone with technique does not make you “better.” You are better because of what you have become. My shodan examination was an entry into this kind of world. Once there, I would be transformed. But the training for shodan is always challenging, sometimes savage. You are usually at the top of your form, impetuous and dangerous. Hungry to achieve your goal, you mistake the symbol for the object and will do anything for the prize. There are more mistakes at this level than at any other. If you are going to get your nose broken, it is probably at this time.

For all the danger, there is also a sense of exhilaration. You live entirely in the moment, and there are no second chances. It strips away all conceptualization, and you are left with what you have and how well you have prepared. You have yourself and the moment, and then you become the moment.

All of this, and the opportunity to do this, is based on unrelenting practice. I practiced with fanatical zeal. As I did so, I passed into a peculiarly beautiful world of aesthetics. The feel and smell of my long hair flapping against the back and collar of my

karate uniform. The crack and slap of that same uniform as my punches and kicks rifled out in combinations across the floor. The smell of my sweat. The tips of my brown belt slapping up against my chest as I leapt into the air. But above all, the hardwood floor. The sheen of that floor became the perfect mirror. On one level, it served as the physical surface for my karate. On another, it was a mirror, in both a literal and figurative sense, for all I was. The floor reflected every mistake and triumph. I saw myself stumble and soar on it. If I made a mistake, I saw it there. If my technique was good, I felt it in my foot's connection with the hardwood. The smell of hardwood became the smell of karate and, in my mind, the smell of Japan. There could be no life but that of the martial artist, called in Japanese the *budoka*, one who does the martial arts. At nineteen I loved that world to the exclusion of all others.

To successfully pass the shodan exam, you must show basics, sparring, and forms. All of these things are prescribed. When you do the forms, you must demonstrate one from those you learned as a beginner and another, a choice form, selected from the advanced group. You never know which form will be chosen. It is the examiner's way of making sure that you practice the basics. People often practice the advanced form they have chosen to the exclusion of all else and fail the exam. There is a lesson here. Things come full circle and you are reminded of your beginnings. You are always a beginner. As a black belt you become a beginner again. You cannot do the *kata*, the forms, in the same way you did as a white belt or you will not pass. You must do it as a black belt in order to catch its essence.

To me, the world of karate always seemed right. The warrior seemed to need nothing. He or she seemed unfeeling and therefore strong. But the reality was that the opposite was true, for there is no one more passionate than the warrior. True warriors live a life close to their own heartbeat. They are passionate about their art and their existence. A dispassionate nature is the opposite of the warriors' way. No one is more committed than they.

At nineteen I was powerful, but paradoxically gentle. Since earliest childhood I had always been so. At first it had been difficult for me to do karate at all. I was introverted, and in the beginning, I was unable to use the focused warrior's yell, the *kiai*, without prompting from my teachers. Repelled by violence and the possibility of harming others, I was unable to respond to attacks. Why, then, did I practice this art that, on the surface at least, involved so much violence?

In the months leading up to my first degree black belt exam, as I became fully committed to the warrior's way, I asked myself this question countless times. McDonald and I trained with ferocious intensity. He held nothing back. With this kind of training, I would come to know if I was strong or weak, committed or a mere dilettante. I would come home battered and bruised and sometimes had to soak my arms in warm salt water in order to continue the next day. I wore the skin off the soles of my feet, taping them the next day in order to go on. I experienced a kind of death, a loss of the self in the task at hand.

My mother became alarmed. She asked countless questions about what was going on. My father kept silent. One warrior to another, he understood what it took to do well,

but I could see the concern in his eyes. "Gentle-man" that he was, he did not want his son to be hurt, perhaps did not want me to go through a ritualized form of what he had experienced.

In class I did the beginner's workout for two hours and then the advanced class after it, a total of four hours. This was three times a week, and every day I worked out for an additional hour or two on my own. I was tough with the lower belts. They said that my workouts were too hard, and that I was a fanatic. At the time I did not care. I felt that I was making progress and that I was doing them a favour.

In fact, my attitude wasn't the way of the warrior at all, just one side of it. It was Mcdonald's side: strength and power, death to the enemy. Over the next few years, as I started to realize this, my image of Mcdonald changed. The military tattoos and tough talk didn't hold as much power as they once had. He told me that if someone pulled a knife on him and demanded his wallet, he would kill him. Deep inside, I knew that I couldn't countenance that kind of violence.

I began to simultaneously abhor and admire him. But this left a question. If strength alone was not the answer, what was? The resolve and courage of the warrior had an appealing beauty, but Mcdonald's brutality did not. I practiced karate to develop my spiritual side, not to worship violence. The founder of modern day karate, Gichin Funakoshi, once said that violence corrupted karate training. At nineteen I agreed with him, and thought I knew what he meant.

One reason that karate attracted me was that it had a sense of resolution. There was a finality to it that did not exist outside the training hall. I found that finality

refreshing. There was a clarity to karate I appreciated, a kind of calling forth of courage not present in other circumstances.

There was also a paradox. In the discipline of training, perhaps violence might lead to gentleness and serenity. I had not yet seen this in McDonald, but desperately wanted to believe that he might have it. If a warrior trained hard enough, he could transcend the need for violence. I saw this as the true reason for studying the way of the warrior. It is true that through paradox we can live fully, be at once gentle and strong, even attain to something beyond either strength or gentleness and enter the realm of spiritual development. As a young man I was right to believe that these things were real, for they are indeed possible through the martial way. At that time though, a model, someone who embodied these qualities, had not come my way. I would have to wait some time for them, the karate masters who would teach me more than technique.

*September 1985: Outside the School of Karate Master Masatoshi Fukuda*

I stand on the sidewalk outside Ebisu station. Another week and the All Japan championships will be on at the Budokan. I have been in Japan only a couple of weeks. Over my jet lag, I am like an excited child, running from temple to temple, taking pictures like a tourist and practicing my Japanese by asking everyone what time it is. It is a kind of puppy love of Japanese culture. Kamakura, Meiji Jingu shrine, the site of the forty seven ronin. All of my boyhood dreams are coming true. I have waited so long to come here, and it is all so right and true, such a great nation, such kind people.

I have finished my workout and done well, still strong at this stage, the edible viral syndrome having not yet set in, and I am not beset by the diarrhea that will begin to plague me in a week or two. Seeing Master Fukuda, the chief instructor of the Japan Karate Association, is like seeing a legend come to life. He looks exactly like the photos I have pored over since youth: small but powerful, palpable, an aura of strength in reserve. To be around him is to be taught. The man who walked across China as a gesture of apology to his teacher is as gentle as a small child when you meet him in person. I am happy to be among these great men. I am happy to be part of it. I feel as though I belong here, as though I was meant to come here. I am Meijin, born to the martial way, born to the sword like my idol Kanazawa sensei. These are the thoughts that swirl through my head like autumn leaves.

Today I take some time off to go to Kamakura. I was there a week before, but this time I am going to visit the grave of Master Funakoshi, the founder of modern karate. I have seen his pictures in karate texts and imagined what it would be like to pay tribute to the man who created the art I love. And I love Japan. Oh, how I love it. I wish I were Japanese. In a past life, I must have been. What else could explain this joy, and the desire to be part of all this? I cannot wait to burn incense at the grave of the master.

I am fortunate and get a seat on the train. Straightening my back, I tuck the canvas bag containing my karate uniform under my arm. I sit stoically but exultantly in my spot, knowing with pride that as a second degree black belt I am the senior at the end of the line in sensei Fukuda's private dojo. It is all that I ever wanted.

*May 1986*

I am in the line at the dojo. Kazama sensei is teaching us, and we are finishing the workout. We have done the basics, gone through the beginner's forms—Heian “Peaceful mind,” Tekki “First clause”—and then on to the more advanced forms—Kanku Dai, “To look at the sky,” 72 moves long; Bassai Dai, long and powerful, “To assault a fortress”; and my favourite, the one I have loved since boyhood, Empi, “The flight of the swallow.”

I dip low, imitating the swallow's action, quick and light, clever and mobile. It is me, this form, and I have lived it, it has lived in me for fifteen years. I try to make it come alive, and, when I finish, everyone claps in response. I am not the same man who came to Japan a year before. Lithe and light, my gi is longer and my black belt worn, so that now it shows white through the black silk. At the end of the form there is a gap, an ending that holds the deepest significance. How you end is as important as how you do the form. It must be complete, and it must end properly. By saying nothing, it says everything and holds all the potential for defence and attack. There is great power in the emptiness. I understand this more than I did 9 months ago, but I still do not fully understand the way of the warrior.

We move to sparring. I shift down the line, changing my opponent each time as we perform the prearranged techniques. Five punches to the head, five blocks, and a counter. We move through the routines, punches, and kicks blindingly fast, making our uniforms crack with each move. There is no one here, man or woman, who is under the second degree black belt level, and there is no slowing down or holding back. Next, free sparring.

I draw a third-degree black belt: Takahashi Miyuki; she looks away as she bows. We take our stances, while all around us people mix it up in a melee of blindingly fast technique. She catches my hesitancy and looks up at me. Have I taken it easy on her by hesitating? Do I think she can't handle whatever attack I would give? I have insulted her and am going to pay. She leaps forward, jumps high, and attacks with a backfist, then, before landing, fires a front kick at my chest. It grazes my uniform, I shift back, and as she lands, I sweep out her front foot, firing a reverse punch at her head. But she is too fast, and shifts in mid-fall, sending a kick to my head, a beautiful manoeuvre that leaves me breathless in admiration, but comes up short. When she is on her feet again, I score with a punch to her midsection.

“Yamete!! Gyaku de!!” “Stop!! Change !! My next opponent is a young, shaven-head, tough guy from Dai Ichi university. I groan inside. Fanatic. The shaved head tells it all. After we bow, he attacks, punching furiously at my head. I can't get a technique in, but still must stop him. Finally, I get smart and start using my long legs to keep him away, firing roundhouse kicks at his head. Controlling the power, I stop short of contact, but he uses this kindness as an opening to punch me in the head. Now I am angry. The next kick strikes him hard in the face. He shakes it off, grunts, and attacks again. I kick as hard as I can, and this time my foot hurts on contact. Same result. Nothing. He just keeps coming. On the last kick, I do not care what happens to me or to him, and I hold nothing back. He staggers, but comes on a little more before Kazama calls time.

That night I do not go out to dinner, but return to my bunk, my lip split open, and my body covered in bruises. Later, I go to the public bath. Sitting in the hot water,

the tears come, and I long for home. But for the first time, I also feel affection for Kazama sensei, and within me there is a subtle appreciation for what he has told me about emptiness and for the mystery of the martial way.

*Mould on the Walls, Cockroaches in Your Bed*

It is November, and Tokyo grows colder. I cannot believe that a place so hot in August can be so cold a few months later. I have lost a great deal of weight. In the shower the other students are beginning to comment. “Winky,” an easygoing burly red-headed guy from Southern California, says, “Hey man, you are gettin’ seriously skinny. You better take care of yourself.” With Winky every second word is “man.” He drives everyone nuts, but like the humorous swordsman in Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai*, we need him around.

In the martial arts foreign community there are many types. Here, in our world, black belt degrees mean nothing. It is only how you fight that matters. I am not prepared for this, and it cuts hard. I am accustomed to the kind of recreational karate we do at home. There it is a sport. There is an understanding that you are training, but that it is not real fighting. Fighting is for the street, and maybe the training in the dojo will help, but karate is not street fighting. At home, no one talked about this, pretending that they were practicing a deadly fighting art, but most of them knew that what we did was just an activity. They wondered if they really could survive an all-out confrontation. Were they really warriors?

There are a few of us who do know. René, the Chilean-American third dan, a dan is a black belt level, who downed the three men who tried to take his wallet, knows he can fight. I am not so sure. These last few months have been tough. At times I feel like an impostor, remembering my students back home who sometimes told me that they were afraid of me. Did they have reason to be? I cannot answer that question. I am troubled, and when I put on my black belt, I do not feel like a true budoka, one who practices the martial arts. Once I throw it into the corner in disgust. It takes me ten minutes to apologize to myself and dust it off. I know it isn't fair. I worked so hard to get it, yet now I feel so weak and confused. It doesn't seem right for me to put it on.

Every day I am beaten. I am the senior at the end of the line, but others, sometimes two or three belt levels below me, defeat me. There are sneers from those who do not respect me. Accustomed to the automatic deference a sensei gets in his dojo, I am infuriated. I am still operating from a Canadian frame of reference, and have not yet changed. You cannot fake it here, cannot roll along on your theoretical knowledge, teaching skills, or contributions to this or that martial arts organization. Here there is no room for a sixth degree black belt with a pot belly. Either you have it or you don't. Either you block or you don't.

My biggest problems come, not from the Japanese, but from the Americans and Canadians. There are only 13 or 14 of us, regulars who train throughout the week. There are not that many enemies to make, but it still happens. The worst is Brian, a 23-year-old from Vancouver, who thinks he is tough. The second time Kazama sensei matches us in sparring, nothing is held back. He infuriates me by looking away when I attack. To teach

him a lesson, I punch him full force in the chest. He mutters an obscenity, and when Kazama isn't looking, drops his block on my elbow joint.

Others are the same, looking away or smiling when I attack. They consider me weak, too kind and not fast or strong enough, but the real problem is that I am not getting enough food. The tiny amounts of rice served in restaurants aren't enough to keep me going. After each workout we go to a coffee shop with Kazama sensei. There the main dish is a slice of cheese toast with shredded cabbage. I am always hungry. My schedule is full, and I do not get any down time. In order to be able to train full time, I must teach English at night. The result is exhaustion, and I have to force myself to get up and make the morning workouts. Soon I begin to hate karate and Japan.

Living in the Hoitsugan is like being in the army or in a slum. We are all foreigners, living in bunk beds in the basement of Fukuda Sensei's apartment building. It is filthy. At night you can feel the cockroaches run across your bed. When I go for a walk, rats scurry across the street in front of me. New to the East, I do not realize that other countries in Asia are much poorer. Compared to them, Japan is luxurious.

All the same, the clothes I brought from Canada have mould on them. My karate gi is a mass of blackening filth, and in the first month I have to get a new one. The moisture and humidity get into everything, and it makes me sick to look at the filth on the Hoitsugan walls. Each time I work out, I hang my gi out to dry, and every morning I put it on wet. There were three of them when I came. Now, After two months, two of them are unusable. I wear the new one I bought in Japan in order to keep going and save time.

After the first month of training , things get tougher. It is not just the sheer difficulty of working out each day; it is also the place itself. The Hoitsugan is a foreign ghetto. Run by Joe Rodriguez, a Peruvian-American who has lived in his tiny room for five years, it is crudely obscene. There are no standards for cleanliness. The majority of tenants don't care, but some do. Klaus, a German who can speak excellent English, and grew up in America, is especially bothered by it.

One day I come home and he is standing in the kitchenette area of the dormitory. As I walk in the door he turns to me and calmly smashes a plate on the floor. It is littered with porcelain. He has been doing this for quite some time. The whole scene looks, like something from a madman's dream. "Well," he says, "If I'm going to live in filth, it might as well be mine," and goes on breaking plates.

I understand him. Every morning I wake up to rock and roll and Joe's voice yelling in his thick New York accent: "Yo!! Perry baby. Get up or I'll butt fuck you man. It's time to roll!" I hate it so much that I have to get out of there. Whenever possible, I take a train out to the suburbs and go for a walk, or take another trip to Kamakura and walk in the bamboo groves. Anything to get away from them and the filth.

The fact that the love of my life, karate, is not what I expected in the land of its origin is a bitter realization. It is not just that my imaginary world is not what I thought it would be, it is also that I am being forced to look directly at who I am every day. Everything is being called into question, and it is so difficult at times that I am sometimes reduced to tears, and my world is ripped apart.

*Winky Goes Down*

I begin to harden. One day we are in the line practicing kihon ippon kumite. The idea behind this kind of sparring is to give one perfect punch, holding nothing back, with no hesitation. The opponent blocks and delivers a counterattack in the same manner. It trains you to put everything into one instant of focused attack. Like the sudden release of a spring, you shoot forward and deliver all that you have. In North America it is considered simple basics. In Japan they are obsessed with it, because they know its true value; that it is the essence of karate.

It is Wednesday, and Kazama is teaching. I am paired up at the end of the line with René. I am the attacker, but already he is smiling. I am no problem, right? In his mind, he has already written me off. He will save his energy for Pierre, the Frenchman at the end of the line, or Kam Foukar, the Nietzsche-loving Iranian who is strong and moves like a blur you can barely see. Those are worthy opponents, not this red-headed weakling.

Kazama sensei moves up alongside him and says to him, in Japanese, "Take his front teeth out." I hear him and suddenly there is nothing in the room but him, me, and the white-hot rage that fills me. Son of a bitch, I say to myself, we'll see who loses their teeth. I will hand his to him, not the other way around. I shoot forward as the command comes. A vicious blur of speed, I am inside his attack and punch him squarely between the eyes. His head snaps back, he goes down, and I see Kazama's look of astonishment in my peripheral vision. While René gets up off one knee, Kazama shouts the command to start free sparring. I snap my head around for the next opponent, and it is Winky. I could care less who the hell it is, and I am on him before he can think, smashing through his

defences with a front kick that buries itself deep in his ribs, then punch him solidly in the mouth with a lunge punch. He goes down too and is on the floor when Kazama calls a halt to it all. Terry Johnson is already moving to pull me away from Winky, but thinks better of it when he looks me in the eye.

Later he will say, in his thick British accent, “Bloody ’ell man. I thought you were going to kill ’im.” He was right; I would have. But it was not something I am proud of. I did something very unlike me, I violated the way of the warrior. Funakoshi, the founder of modern karate, wrote that violence corrupts karate training. Here, in the dojo, where learning, and not violence for violence’s sake, was supposed to take place, I have indulged myself and taken out my frustrations in order to make myself feel better. Although others might say that I fought for survival, I know that there is another side to it.

Kazama sensei calls an end to class after I have downed both René and Winky. I think that I see the beginnings of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. It infuriates me; but at least there is no punishment. I do not get the beating I expect. At the same time, it puzzles me. I expect that, as the sensei of the dojo, Kazama would mete out some kind of punishment.

For a few days I wrestle with it. What was he trying to teach me? What the hell does any of this have to do with budo? I don’t need to train in karate to know how to punch somebody in the mouth. I can practice punching a heavy bag and then pick fights for that. And what about Kazama himself? Though a brilliant teacher, and occasionally compassionate, he is a social failure. Penniless, and living in a cramped apartment under a railway line, he could hardly be called a success. When we are out in public he acts like an

idiot. Every second word is about masturbation, sex, or a variation on excrement or abnormality. His questionable English is full of mispronounced expletives taught him by the Rodriguez brothers. How can this guy be admired?

In retrospect, though, I could see the value of his teaching. Is life always nice and refined? Does it always go our way? No. Whether he did it intentionally or not, Kazama had given me a priceless gift. The other side of life is violence and death. Sometimes we are cast into it. We do not ask for it, and it does not mean that we should make violence a way of life, but there are times when, whether we want to or not, we must fight. Something deep and of great power comes out of us when we face this realization. If Kazama had not told René to hand me my teeth, I would not have discovered the power within me that prevented him from doing so. No testing, no tempering. In the modern world, where we experience things from a distance, we have lost contact with this truth.

In the situations I faced in the Hoitsugan, there was no removal. Either you were fully committed, or you had your head taken off. It was difficult to accept, but I understood its value. Do we live in our fantasies, or do we make ourselves accountable? A fist aimed at our heads forces the issue. Kazama knew this and helped me feel it on a gut level. It is in the gut, the *hara*, where you feel your knowledge.

When I came back to the dojo a few days later, I was ready. I fought like a demon. Expecting both Winky and René to exact their revenge when sensei wasn't looking, I was surprised to find that they had accepted what had happened and had gained more respect for me. Dumbfounded, I carried on in the endless round of matches. At night in my small bunk, I had dreams in which I fought opponents one after the other. Much to the

annoyance of my dojo mates, I ended up kicking the walls and speaking Japanese in my sleep.

As a result of all the fighting, my physical condition declines. I had several minor injuries, ranging from a split lip and facial abrasions to more serious sprains and bumps, and always, always, bruises. I still could not fully digest Japanese food, and diarrhea was a constant problem. Concerned about dehydration, I went to Seiroka hospital in Tsukiji. They told me that I had “edible viral syndrome,” which meant that it was difficult for me to become accustomed to another country’s food. But knowing this did not help me.

A partial solution came from Terry Johnson, the lanky Englishman who had pulled me off Winky. He took me to areas of Tokyo that the foreign community both needed and treasured. Beginning with spaghetti houses and ending up in imitation English pubs, we went on an eating and drinking spree. At the end of it, I became violently ill, but felt wonderful. I was learning that I was not Japanese and needed my native food to help me stay healthy. After two weeks of the spaghetti house diet, I had begun to put some weight on and resembled my pre-Japan self. Things got better that way, but the love affair was never quite the same. My image of Japan began to crumble and could never be rebuilt.

The knowledge that I was not Japanese, realized at such a terrible price, was an opportunity to ask new questions, questions that came flooding out of me after being hidden so long under the cloak of the “samurai” fantasy. If I was not Japanese, then who was I? I was Western, but what did that mean? I had been living in that cultural skin since birth, but what did it mean? I would sit for long hours on the train or in restaurants asking

myself these questions: What is it to be Western? Who am I? Growing up in my father's house, I knew more about Rinzai Zen than the philosophical foundations of the West. Now that I was beginning to regain my strength I would have to try to answer these questions.

My search begins on the Tokyo train system. While riding the trains, I begin to read the classics. It is wonderful. I am on the train, but I am also at the symposium with Plato, at parties with him in the Gorgias, arguing ethics with Aristotle, and in the prison cell of Boethius, while dame Philosophy consoles him. I walk through the classical world, learning what it means to be a man of the West. The line of black Penguin classics grows longer and longer next to my bunk, and it is this that keeps me putting on my gi every day for the 7:30 workout. My worship of the Japanese and the great karate senseis is gone. I do not know what will take its place, but there will never again be a time when they will appear to me as gods. The smell of cryptomeria cedar is gone forever. They are just people now, and their culture is just another country's way of doing things.

I go to my job at Asahi Sankyo, and read. It becomes an act of rebellion. If I can cry out that I do not need these people, that I am not of their culture, that I can beat them in the dojo, then perhaps one day I can be free. But I am also sad and feel somehow betrayed. Karate, once beautiful, has become hideously ugly. My lover has turned into a hag, a harpy who has lied and deceived me. Is this why I gave up a home, job and life in Canada. This? So that I can hang out with Enrico Watanabe, the Peruvian Japanese, whose idea of a good time is to get to know Japanese gangsters? So that I can watch Izumiya sensei glare at me from his toothless head while he punches a beer dispenser

because he cannot get alcohol at ten o'clock in the morning? So that I can sit at a table with a bunch of guys who laugh uproariously while Kazama, a man I am supposed to admire, calls America a "fuck man" country and pantomimes masturbating while our waitress serves us? The disappointment in me is impossible to measure and the rage is a terrible reality.

It comes out in the dojo. I want to kill them all. I brutalize Watanabe each time we meet. Every workout, I select a new body part and punish him for being who he is. One day it is his chest, and the next day he is not at training. After that it is his shin, and later I see him limping on the street outside the central dojo. The Japanese senseis begin to talk about it, about who is doing these things. I can feel a "lesson" coming on, but I do not care. The gentleness is being taken from me, drained with each encounter.

And I get beaten as much as I beat up others. At one point, I am thrashed by three higher ranking black belts in a row. Each time I face a higher ranking sensei, it is the same. I am toyed with, wounded then released. Just enough to illustrate a point, teach me a lesson, or just because I am there. I cannot escape the feeling that these men are budo sorcerers, warlocks whose magic makes it impossible for me to touch them.

Their eyes confirm it. Ueki sensei is erect and flawless. One day I meet him on the stairwell of the central dojo. He looks straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge me, and his eyes are like the odd dull buttons used for eyes on stuffed dolls. Asai sensei, eccentric and bone-thin, with his pompadour hair, yellow checkered vest, and long cigarette holder, blows out smoke as he greets you, but in the eyes, there is a glittering madness. This is

the man who spent thirteen years in China, came out with his own style of vicious slapping techniques, and works a so-called import-export business out of Shanghai. Matsumoto sensei, called “The Angel of Death” by the foreign students, always wears expensive suits, personally cut, and is never without cologne. He is the soul of courtesy, yet under the suit are at least twenty knife wounds gained in the course of his “security” work. He once punished a man who drew a knife on him by breaking both his arms. His eyes are so intense you cannot look at them.

At night I am numb. Nothing can reach me, no amount of samurai mythology can sustain me. Now there is only a craving. It is no longer even necessary to say that I am Western. That is so obvious, so intensely so, that I would laugh if I said it out loud. What I need is the wisdom to know that the West is legitimate, the admission that it sings its own song, and that it is okay to love my own culture and leave the mythological one behind. And there is one more thing, a thing that I need very badly, something my life in Tokyo cannot provide: the gentleness of female companionship.

### *Keiko*

After the spaghetti restaurant spree I resolve to train only twice a week until I can recover from the perpetual diarrhea and weakness. Suzuki Sensei, a high ranking teacher at the J. K. A., sees how skinny I am and takes me to a friend who is a Shiatsu therapist and herbalist. The treatment feels good, but there is no long-term effect, and in a matter of days I am back to my old condition. Even a trip to St. Luke’s, a famous hospital in

Tsukiji, yields nothing. I leave frustrated, wondering where they got their medical degrees.

The night, after I am diagnosed with edible viral syndrome, I decide to go to the Corn Popper. A friend, Terry Vickers, goes straight to the front door of the small lounge and raps on the door. He introduces me to “Mac,” the American who owns the place. He looks like the kind of Caucasian who is making a killing in Japan because the Japanese do not know one foreigner from the next. Japanese women think he is handsome, but he is just average looking. His business, providing a place for Japanese and foreigners to mix, seems exotic, but it is just a low-maintenance mixing place. It is easy for him to keep a place like this open, and he gets the best of the foreign life in Japan.

Vickers I already know. Out of Brighton, he is the perfect working class Englishman. Eternally engaged in a class war, he is always trying to prove that he is a regular guy, while at the same time wanting to be part of the upper classes he resents. A long string of Japanese girlfriends looking for a “gaijin” boyfriend have kept him occupied, and with each passing month, he grows steadily less interested in karate. We get along well enough and share a disdain for the Rodriguez brothers, Brian and Watanabe. When I look at him, I end up looking at myself. How much of me is in him? Where does the thrill of imagined convictions end and the facing of what we are begin? As I walk into the Corn Popper, I have still not answered this question.

Terry, called “Little Terry” to distinguish him from Terry Johnson, who is six feet five- inches tall to his five four, walks into the Corn Popper ahead of me and sits down with Hanako, a 20-year-old he already has something going on with. I sit between a

white guy and an older, attractive, Japanese woman. I can't pinpoint her age. I am 30, and older could mean she is 35.

We watch a video. Couples and small groups talk together. The room crackles with the tension you feel when you are interested in someone, but are at the same time are leery of them. The two groups, Japanese and Gaijin, probe at each other. I watch it swirl around me, the give and take, push and yield, seeing where the barriers end. I am not really interested but caught get up in it at the same.

Next to me the Japanese woman speaks in simple but clear English to the Gaijin beside her. I watch Terry and Hanako give each other a glance, a signal that it is time to leave. It is amusing, Terry playing Frank Sinatra in some 40s movie. A subtle hint. It wouldn't be right for him to just come out and talk to her, to ask her to leave with him, he must do what is right to save her public honour. It is amusing because it is obvious and clumsy, but also because Hanako wouldn't have cared how he said it. She is a gaijin hunter, a Japanese woman in search of a foreign husband. If it had not been Terry it would have been someone else.

When they are gone, I take a moment to look around the room. Somehow it is pleasant to be there. The smell of popcorn and the Western video are reminders of home. I am feeling as though I need it, and after a few moments, the tension begins to melt. After watching the film for a while I turn to the Japanese woman and smile. I am not good at this, have never been good at what Terry calls "chatting someone up." At a loss for words, she says nothing and turns back to the film, but then a few moments later asks me my name. Her English is not bad, better than my Japanese. I ask her her name in return ,

and she tells me it is Keiko. After a few moments, we are talking, and then I excuse myself. I feel there has been enough of the meeting of two cultures, and I am tired after the day's workouts. It takes a while for me to acclimatize myself to the glare and lights of Ebisu after coming out of the lounge. I find it difficult because it is so frenetic. The pace and appearance of Tokyo is always like this.

I am walking up the sloping streets and turn at a Shinto shrine, when a small red car pulls up to the curb. It is Keiko, and in an exaggerated American-style accent, she says, "Hello." There is a moment when neither of us says anything, a kind of gap, full of possibilities. I am not sure where to go with it and am definitely not sure whether or not I want the complications of it. But in the end, I smile and ask her where she is going. It is the signal we have both been waiting for. "Betsu ni," she answers, "Nowhere in particular." I almost suggest that we go somewhere to have a cup of tea, but then realize that in Japan this is an outrageously bold pick-up line and, instead, ask her if she likes coffee.

She does not answer, but smiles in a noncommittal way and opens the passenger door of her car. I slip inside, and in a few minutes we are sitting in a "kissaten," one of the hundreds of coffee shops in Tokyo where people talk, escape work, do business, or do what we are doing. We have "ko cha," English tea with milk, as opposed to "o cha," the green tea of Japan. We talk with gaps between the halting statements and the questions. There is humor in it, a playfulness as we feel each other out that is pleasant and distracting.

At the end of two hours, we exchange phone numbers and go our separate ways. She is hours out of central Tokyo on the way to Gotemba near Mt. Fuji, and this makes it difficult to meet, since I would have to take a train for three hours to reach her. But I am thinking, as her car disappears into the rain, that I would like to see her again, and that there is something pleasant about her that might make the distance worth it.

*Izumi Tamagawa*

After several months I move out of the Hoitsugan. A colleague at work helps me to get a small student-style apartment on the Odakyu line. Though it is absolutely bare, it is still wonderful to be there. I have my clothes and karate gi, a sheet or two on top of a mattress, some dishes, and the Penguin Classics. Simple and sparse, it has a modular bathroom, and is about fifteen feet long and six wide.

It is not much, but I am happy. Compared to the Hoitsugan, it is paradise. Keiko and I become lovers. To once again have someone to make love with, and be next to, is wonderful and the perfect antidote for the stark cruelty of the dojo. For a while I take time out from training and spend time with her. We go for long drives in the country. When we return, we spend long afternoons in her apartment. She is passionate and giving, and our lovemaking is intense and consuming.

In the new year, we visit a friend of hers, a female tea master who lives in a centuries-old home. As I enter, she says: "Atama o kiotsukete." "Be careful of your head." The doors and rafters are impossibly low, the whole house designed in a bygone age when Japanese were smaller. I sit in the hush of the tea room, Keiko takes the place of

the second tea master, and I am the honoured guest. It is New Years, yet I do not think of home. As the ceremony is explained to me, there are no thoughts of the parties in Canada. At the moment this means much more to me.

I cannot sit in seiza, Japanese sitting position, because of the bruising on my shins. I have received too many hard blocks there, so instead I sit cross-legged. Keiko looks completely absorbed as she performs the ritualized movements of the ceremony. She is as happy as I have seen her since we met, and later when I ask her why this is so, she says that because during the ceremony she can say to herself. "I am Japanese." The remark intrigues me, but now I am here, while the ancient kettle hisses and Keiko beams. Inoue sensei explains the origins of the ceremony to me, and I am suddenly very interested in what she says. The historian in me is interested in the beginning of this ritual. Another issue comes to me while Keiko whips the tea into a bright green froth. What of history? I have still have not decided what to do about the love I have neglected.

To me, the ebb and flow of events is everything. The idea that in past times the view of life and life itself, were different, fascinates me. There is no way to explain it. As Keiko turns the cup and raises it to her lips, I tumble backwards in time.

*May 1965*

The small boy is dressed more beautifully than the others. He is different and hated. They call him a girl and never pick him for sports teams. The girls feel that he is a crybaby, not a real boy. He does not go out to play at recess. There is no point. Why go out to be spit on or beaten up? The briefcase he carries cannot be used as a shield all the

time, only in the mornings when they beat him up on the bus, or after three o'clock when they chase him to the bus stop.

He has no friends. Going to school each day is a struggle, but there are some good things. At school he can read books about history and learn. He is the brightest of them and the best student in the school. At lunch he takes out the books no one else will read and devours them. His favourite is *The Lion in the Gateway*. A small colourful book, it is about the battle of Thermopylae, and he imagines himself there with the three hundred Spartans defying the Persian hordes. He has read books on the foundation of Rome, Ben Hur, anything about history or the past. The ancient world fascinates him. He fantasizes about teaching history to a large group of people, dressed in a suit. He is not interested in the Hardy Boys or hockey.

He sits in the linoleum smell of a mid-60s elementary school and waits, reading and reading, drawing the sketches that make him one of the best artists in the school, enduring the taunts and the hatred, crying at night, wishing his father would hug him and tell him he is all right as he is, that it is okay, that one day things will be different, but the reassurances do not come, and he studies harder to make them all pay. He fantasizes about beating them up, especially the boy who leads the persecution. But in the real world he is gentle and cannot hurt another child, even the ones who bully him the most.

I am the boy. I am the one who reads the books on republican Rome, who recites Tennyson, who can read and understand the texts at the back of the room, the texts my teachers never touch. Through the difficult times of being bullied and the pain of being

different, history keeps me going. It is more than entertainment, it is life. And there is more. It is almost as though I have been in the places I read about.

I can smell the streets of Rome, see the Mediterranean from the deck of a trireme, ride a chariot through the streets of Thebes. For me these things are not dead; they are real. They are part of me, and every historical reference, every new book on the ancient world, is handled with reverence and awe.

The sense of connection is a lonely feeling. None of the other students are interested in the Delosian League or the Greco-Persian wars. I am as much marching with the Roman legions as I am sitting in my classroom. And there is more. I have the historian's questions and the historian's wonder. Where is Rome now? Where are the buildings and people? Why do I wear this shirt and jeans? Why not a robe? What would it be like if time flowed backwards and I could stand next to Caesar? As I look out the window of my classroom and listen to the others play, the questions haunt me.

Who were these people? Now they are bones amid the remnants of ancient streets, but who were they then? What made them happy or sad? What was it like to see a little Roman girl crying in the street because she had lost her toy or could no longer play knucklebones? What was it like to wait by the side of the street, to listen to the sound of trumpets while the seventh legion marched by? To stand inches from the standard bearer? These are questions I must know the answers to. History is like a muse, inflaming me. My own time means little. Their time means everything. I can smell the food of the hawkers in the coliseum.

Keiko turns the bowl and hands it to me. I am back, having fallen forward in time to a teahouse by the sea. I receive it as the ritual “guest.” We are three of us, as the sound of the sea, just a few hundred yards away, comes to us through the paper screens. I watch her hair fall and marvel at the fact that she exists at all, that I am her lover at all. The dreams of boyhood come to fruition: having tea with a lover by a seaside village on the coast of Japan.

*Enoshima*

We are in Keiko’s small red Toyota on the way to her apartment, and a hawk wheels above Enoshima Bay. I look out of the window at it as it dips down from a dizzying height to pull up just above the waves. Behind it the sun is setting on the sea, a giant red disk dissolving in a vast orange expanse. Suddenly the disk becomes a luminous light behind a huge torii gate whose sweeping arches symbolize Japan. The gate is on an island in the sea, and the island is in a sea of light. It does not seem real.

The moment is frozen. Again, there is a feeling of completeness when the teacup came to my lips. Keiko says nothing, but smiles as I look out the window. I cannot tell whether or not she is amused by me or is just sharing the moment. She already wonders why I am so interested in old things, why haiku, the samurai, and traditional Japan fascinates me so much. I am “Henna Gaijin,” a strange foreigner. She is interested in rock ‘n roll and hamburgers. “Hoka no hito no hana ga moto kireina da,” she tells me. “The other person’s flower is always more beautiful.” I find it puzzling that my interest in her

culture marks me as strange. Am I strange because I want to know the Japanese or because she thinks that I want what Japanese have?

I cannot decide which. With the wind coming in through the window of the Toyota and the red sun setting in the sea, I drift away. She hums, "How Much is that Doggie in the Window?" and I wonder whether she knows the words. She brushes her hair away from her eyes and smiles at me dreamily. We drive through the countryside and are soon back on the highway to Tokyo. A half hour later, we are at her apartment on the other side of the Tama River.

It is small and sparsely decorated, but attractive. Keiko has rattan furniture, because as a Japanese woman on her own that is all she can afford. I have been here many times, but today there is a somehow a sense of deep urgency. We have shared something unusual. There is affection and love, but also a giving of difference. We are from different worlds meeting on indefinable ground.

And there is also our need for release. We are outcasts: she, a divorced Japanese woman, and I, a foreigner. In Japan we are unable to claim legitimacy. Our lovemaking is a way to express the frustration of that pain. Other women have been caring and passionate, but there has usually been something attached to the act of making love, something additional, the expectation of marriage, the expectation of something else. With Keiko it is not like this.

She has told me emphatically that she is not interested in being in love with me. Sex and friendship are enough. For her, there doesn't need to be anything more. When I feel bad that perhaps I am not being fair to her, maybe taking advantage of her, she laughs

out loud and says to me in broken English that I am foolish. "Don't care about me," she says, "Do what you want." Part of me is shocked. As a Westerner I have a set of assumptions. Keiko has none of them. I feel that I am treating her poorly. She feels that we are just having a good time. Once she catches me praying and laughs at my Western sensibilities. She tells me that she knows I am praying for forgiveness and that I should just relax. After we make love and bathe together, we eat kake, Japanese persimmons, late into the night. Keiko asks me about what it is like in the West. I try to tell her, and then she tells me about her life. It is a sad story. She has a daughter and was once wealthy. Now, in the world of Japan, she is less than nothing. Before her husband, before me, there was a U. S. Marine Corps captain. She dreams of living the rest of her life in Gotemba. A place in the country would give her a chance to live the kind of life she wants, one where she would not be judged and could visit her friends and be happy.

Although we have touched each other, we are from different worlds. It is pleasant to be together, we expect nothing from each other and demand nothing. There is an uncomplicated quality to our time together. Something in our time together reaches beyond us and touches that which is elementally human, and at the same time undeniably Japanese.

I feel my culture shredding away, and I wonder who I am. I get dressed and feel for some reason annoyed, even angry. I say nothing, and the silence extends into the night as Keiko drives me home. It is Japanese not to mind the silence, or to find it uncomfortable. I take advantage of it and hide my frustration. She smiles as I leave the car and enter my apartment, a very enigmatic smile.

*The Soft Way*

Kam Foohar whips a front kick at my midsection. He is angry because I have come on strong, and I am hitting him too often. He and the other Iranians are superb karateka. I bow to him, knowing that he has been kind to me. Now the other Iranians wait.

When he was a boy of fourteen, Ali, the fourth Iranian, killed an Iraqi on the battlefield. His intense hooded eyes stare at me across the hardwood floor. In order to be able to move fast enough, I must fight down the fear. Fear slows you. Fear obscures your perceptions and makes you a victim. Here the dojo is a game of survival. Training and sparring like this would kill ordinary people back home and break down the resolve of the karateka I once knew. Some of them would be reduced to tears by this level of training. If this is true, what of the level of warriorship that Ali has lived in? I face ritual death every day, but he dealt with the real thing.

I cannot show weakness, especially in front of Fukuda Sensei. When Ali takes his guard, I break rhythm by quick-stepping back and then shooting forward with a lunge punch. When it is almost complete, I jump high to come down with a backfist strike. It is a good move, but just at the moment I think I have him, he falls away, turns, then whips a reverse roundhouse kick at me, his foot coming up in a beautiful arc from the floor and catching me in the solar plexus.

My breath leaves me and I crumple. It takes me a few moments to recover, then I am back in the practice. In the shower room afterwards, Ali does not apologize or mention the incident. That is not our way. Things like this are just done: taken, and

delivered in silence. This is the third time in a two-week span that I have been seriously hit or injured. I have given out punishment, and am not by any means a whipping boy, but I can feel myself growing tired of it. At the end of my shower, when everyone has gone, I let out a long sigh. This is not the karate I envisioned in my youth. I feel some measure of pride in the fact that I have been able to hold my own, but there is also a hollowness in it. Hit and be hit. Hit and hit again. What is the point of all this? Already, at thirty, I am not as fast as I once was. My injuries heal more slowly than they once did, and I can see a time when I will not be able to do the kind of karate practiced at the Hoitsugan. It is not just the Iranians and people like them. The truth is that hard-style karate, although it can be done by everyone, is done best by young men.

I know that I could play the clever old man on the dojo floor, the one who knows the tricks and outwits the fast and furious younger guys, but that also has a hollow ring to it. If you have to do that, aren't you really just kidding yourself? On the way up the steps from the Hoitsugan to the street I run into Mrs. Fukuda. At that moment she is the wrong person to meet. Fukuda san is the soul of gentleness. Her eyes and face radiate compassion. She is so humble that on the first day in the dojo I mistook her for a cleaning woman. Now she looks at me and smiles into my soul. As I pass by her, I begin to tear up. She has struck something in me, and I have to steady myself against a wall. Grateful that no one can see me, I wander into the street and decide not to go to the breakfast carnival that Kazama resides over.

At that moment something changes. I realize I have been living a lie. Would any of the other guys have had the reaction I had? It is doubtful. Certainly not the Iranians. They

are automatic soldiers. Proud of their savage abilities, they do not know sympathy, gentleness, or a host of other feelings now bearing down on me. As I pass by the street level entrance to the dojo, I can see Takahashi san, the Tai Chi instructor, coming towards me. A burly white-haired man with a crew cut, he has one bad eye. Its opaque interior looks as though it has been put out by a hot iron. I don't know much about him except that he teaches the Tai Chi Chuan at the Hoitsugan following us in the morning. To attend his class would be death. First I would be accused of "chasing two rabbits," in other words, trying to master two arts and in the end mastering neither. Second, I would be the butt of endless jokes on the part of Kazama about how Tai Chi is "oji san bujutsu", old man's art, not to mention the endless sexual references I would have to endure.

For a moment, I am frozen in the street. It is a critical time. If I turn around and follow Takahashi Sensei back down into the Hoitsugan, I will never be the same man. If I keep on walking, I will remain a karateka. It is painful to imagine what life without karate might be. In the end, I turn around and head back to the dojo. The others have gone to be with Kazama. I am alone with Takahashi. He notices me, but then turns away and focuses his attention on the punching post in the corner of the dojo.

With an easy swing of his body he rams his fist into the padded section of the board. It vibrates dramatically. It does not just snap back, as it does when someone strong hits it. Instead, the whole thing from base to tip whips back and forth and then settles into position with a long thick humming sound.

I am transfixed. As the other students file in to practice, I sink to the floor with my back against the wall and sit down to watch. I cannot believe what I have seen. Even

the fourth and fifth degree black belts cannot hit the makiwara that hard. How can this man, who shambles like a bear, manage to do it? After a few moments everyone begins to practice Tai Chi. Unlike karate, it is done in slow motion. I sit and watch, and know that I already have some kind of connection with it. I like it, and want to practice.

There are eleven series of twenty four movements strung together into a long sequence. Takahashi is obviously the most powerful of the group, but everyone there exudes a kind of power as they glide through the moves with grace and precision. Karate has been with me since childhood. It has always been the thing that defined me. Now, in some strange way, I know that, in the future, it will not be important.

Takahashi is a kind teacher. He goes from student to student correcting here, suggesting there. A couple of times he looks my way, but I do not respond. I am used to playing the stoic warrior. Before he can walk over, I get up and go, but I know I will be back. The problem will be how to conceal from Kazama and the others the fact that I am taking Tai Chi in the same dojo where we practice. But practice I must. Looking back on it, I will realize that at that time the joy of doing the hard styles had run its course in me. If I had come to Japan as a nineteen year-old all would have been well. Now, though, I have hit, and been hit, one too many times.

In life there are turning points. Often they are the result of things we have done but cannot see. Sometimes they occur because of what we have become. The instant I stepped out of the Hoitsugan door, I knew that such a moment had come. It would take me to China and beyond, to a different way of thinking, a different way of being, and a

new way of looking at the world. It would give myself permission to drop all pretense and relax into a new reality.

Had karate been a mistake? In the years to come, I would think so. But this was not true. It had been a doorway, one I had passed through. In the weeks and months to come, I would fight on in the dojo, but my appetite for karate would be reduced. Part of me mourned the loss of an old friend. Another tried to fight on in preservation of what had been. But the better part of me realized that the old days were over. Healing, gentleness, and wisdom were overtaking fighting.

#### *A Hint of Healing*

I am sparring one cold January day after winter training, when I receive yet another injury to my shin. There is a golf ball-sized lump there on an unusually large bruise that makes walking difficult. I am going to Tai Chi, and practice has improved my internal health. I have felt the “chi” spoken of in the texts I read as a youngster. My energy has increased, and my breathing has deepened.

But I am still being injured, and it is taking its toll. The leg injury is serious, and I begin to worry about permanent damage. If the swelling does not go down, the leg could become permanently weakened or scarred, and that could inhibit my ability to practice. The larger issue of whether or not I still want to practice a hard-style martial art is there as well, but at the moment, I must find some way of healing myself. I need something direct.

It comes to me from a magazine. The *Tokyo Journal* has an advertisement for shiatsu lessons. I write down the address and telephone number one day after leaving the dojo and go the next day. We talk for a while, and it is a relief to be with a Japanese male who is not punching at me. He asks me why I am interested in Oriental medicine. Why shiatsu? I pull up my pant leg and show him the horrendous bruise on my shin. He nods and pours tea. In Japan talking is not always valued; sometimes it is an impediment. We agree to meet the following Tuesday. In the meantime he gives me a copy of the small book he has published on shiatsu and the eight medical meridians.

Back in my apartment, I read it voraciously, spending the rest of the day learning about the principles of healing according to the Oriental Way. What fascinates me most is the emphasis on relationship. Yang relates to Yin, hard to soft, the five elements to each other, nature to man, and man to woman, all in a complex web. Keiko laughs at me and asks me, again and again, why I am interested in all of this old stuff. In reply I ask her why she likes Patti Page. She hates the anatomical chart that I have on the wall of my apartment, saying it is garish and stupid. I do not care. The healing knowledge I am gaining is priceless.

At a certain point, I go to the karate dojo less and start going to Tai Chi and Shiatsu more. Once, when I see Kazama Sensei in the streets of Ebisu, I turn and walk the other way. It is easier for me than confronting him. What is really happening? The truth is that with each passing day, it is becoming more difficult for me to practice karate. I wonder what I will do about my karate career back home. Here I am just a gaijin target, but there I am a revered sensei with over one hundred students and a position in the Japan

Karate Association of Canada. I ask myself, again and again, how I will be able to teach something that I have profound doubts about. Part of me feels the world is crumbling.

I promise myself I will deal with it later, when I return to Canada. For now, I am learning a great deal and don't want to stop. A compromise comes through the Chiyoda Ku Taikukan karate dojo. I've been training there for several months, and if I train more I can avoid Kazama and the hard-line attitudes of the central dojo and Hoitsugan fanatics. It turns out to be a momentous decision.

### *Entering a New World*

I trundle along on the Ginza line on my way to Chiyoda Ku. The dojo is wonderful. It has a magnificent teaching staff, all of whom are fourth or fifth degree black belts. They are human and compassionate, unlike the rigid hard asses at the hombu dojo. As I arrive at the station, I think of how much I like it. I do not yet know that this will be the last night of serious karate practice in my life. After tonight it will be over. The road to giving it up will begin, and the long slow pathway to healing and kung fu will take its place.

As I get off the train, I do not know that I am about to change the direction of my martial arts training forever. In the dojo, I warm up on the sidelines while Saito Sensei leads the class through the basics, moving up and down the floor in sharp precision. I join the line and work out with the rest. Everything progresses normally, nothing special, basics give way to kata, and kata gives way to sparring. I am doing a kind of sparring

called kaeshi kumite, “back and forth sparring.” I have done it a thousand times. One person goes forward and punches, the other steps back, blocks, and returns the attack.

Then it happens. I shoot forward towards my opponent with a lunge punch. There is a sickening crunch, and my right knee collapses. It is a safe and simple move, and there is no reason for it to go wrong. Yet, in a second, I have collapsed and am on the floor in agony. Saito sensei rushes over and, after seeing that I am all right, jokes that I should be happy. I am still able to attack from the ground. But I know better. This is a serious injury, and somehow I know that I will never be able to practice karate as I have. A few days later the doctor’s examination confirms it. I have snapped the intercruciate ligament in my right knee. It is over.

For the remaining few months in Japan, I study Tai Chi from Takahashi, and Shiatsu from Kimura. I am happy. Keiko notices it and tells me that I am fatter now and that this is good. Although I am not completely aware of it I am glad to be away from karate. It is a relief to be able to practice whatever I want instead of having to be falsely loyal. And with this comes a realization that one of the reasons I am no longer a karateka is that it is too rigid for me. With the other arts creativity is honoured.

It is like being released from a cage. I can do whatever I want to do and go wherever I want to go. I am free.

### Chapter 3: The Book of the Healer

*1993: Inokashira Park*

It is autumn as I get off the train and start my walk through the trendy shops and streets of Kichijoji. After three years I have come back to Japan. I am married now. My wife and I met in a small town in Northeastern B.C. where I was transferred after returning to Canada in 1986, and where Jocelyn was working as a first year teacher. After three years we decided to go to Japan together. Four years have passed since then, and we are now comfortable with our Japanese life. We know the seasons and the festivals that mark them. The rhythm of Japanese life marks our days, and we have both foreign and Japanese friends. On this particular day, I am on my way to a Japanese language lesson. The school is run by Taira sensei, an attractive young woman trying to make a go of it with her own business in the male-dominated world of Tokyo. She teaches foreigners Japanese with two other women in a few rooms on the fifth floor of a building near Kichijoji station.

As I walk through Kichijoji to the edge of Inokashira park, I wonder where Jocelyn and I belong. After four years, we have jobs at a junior college called Senzoku Gakuen. We have risen up from English conversation classes in a factory-like school to jobs with professorial visas. There are perks with this kind of position. Our apartment is paid for by our college. We are taxed at a low level and have four-and-a-half months of paid vacation each year. Our tickets for one return flight anywhere in the world are paid

for in advance. Each year, in March, we receive a bonus equivalent to six months salary, and the college funds and provides other benefits. As for the students, they are attentive, pleasant, and cooperative. Discipline problems are unheard of. Both Jocelyn and I are beginning to forget what it is like to teach North Americans.

Senzoku is a women's college specializing in Music and Education. It is a typical two year women's college. In Japan students attend for a couple of years and then get a job in a company and start the kind of life everyone expects them to have. For some of the young women, this is not a pleasant prospect. They long to travel overseas, marry a foreigner, and live in America. But for most of them, it is where they thought they would be, and pretty much what they always wanted.

Where do we fit? We are in the middle. Japanese life has become part of us, yet we still do not belong. We do not fit in, and the place we occupy is not that of our Japanese friends and, at the same time, not that of typical foreigners. As for me, it has been eight years since I fought for my life in the dojos of the J.K.A. Everything is different. I am married now, and I do not spend my time with Keiko or my dojo mates. I have built a life in Japan with someone else. But there still remains a question. What of bushido, the way of the warrior, the way of life that I have followed since childhood? In some ways it remains, but in other ways it has gone. I make sure that I am always in shape. That is the warrior's way and goes without saying. I sometimes do the karate katas, but I do them slowly to save my knee. In my heart I am still a practitioner, but other things have entered my life turning karate into a code of living rather than a daily practice.

One of these is Tai Chi Chuan. Since the day I saw Takahashi sensei hitting the makiwara board in the Hoitsugan dojo, I have become fascinated with it. To practice it, even the little I know, is pure joy. I have not stopped since my initial exposure to it six years earlier. But one thing puzzles me. Tai Chi Chuan means “The Grand Ultimate Fist” implying that it is the ultimate martial art, the greatest of them all, and many of my teachers have told me that this is so, but how? What is there in this series of slow motion moves that makes it so great? It looks ineffectual compared to karate or Shaolin boxing. Yet its reputation for invincibility is well established. Tai Chi masters trounce high ranking karateka and hard style masters. I know all of the legends and stories. Fukuda Sensei once told me that Tai Chi was the highest pinnacle of martial art development. He had studied it and said that the higher you went in Tai Chi, the softer you got. For an accomplished master to say this was a great endorsement. What was there about this art that made it supreme? I was determined to find out.

By coincidence, one of my classmates at Kichijoji language school was also studying Tai Chi Chuan. I asked him if I could join his school. He said yes, and so, every Sunday, Beda and I would go to the dojo of Ohtsuka sensei in Ginza and practice the twenty-four move Tai Chi form. My teacher was the number one woman in Japan—Kazuko Ohtsuka—and her husband was a famous karate and Tai Chi master. Studying with them, I received the fundamentals of the art: how to breathe and move correctly, how to relax and achieve suppleness, how to yield, and how not to oppose force with force.

It was a strange and difficult experience. I was accustomed to moving fast and hard, and performing the moves slowly was not easy for me. I always went through the form too quickly, and my moves were robotic and stiff. The essence of Tai Chi is to flow, and at the beginning I did not have much success. My first art, karate, was opposing Tai Chi. One was devoted to power and speed, the other to yielding and softness, and they opposed each other. Time after time Ohtsuka sensei told me that I had little or no internal power. Both husband and wife implored me to relax. Old women in the dojo were better at the art than I was; they could relax and I could not. It was demeaning and difficult. In one way, Tai Chi was easier than karate. In another way, it was harder. While physically less demanding, it was mentally and spiritually tougher.

One good aspect of my training was that I was beginning to struggle with the concept of “chi,” and the attempt to understand it would be my entry point into the world of the Chinese martial arts. Ohtsuka sensei continually stressed its importance. “Relax,” she would say in Japanese. “Let your chi flow.” Yet what was this thing called “chi” that she wanted me to release? I wasn’t entirely sure. I knew the definitions given in martial arts texts, but what did this mean in my body? What did it mean in application? How did you feel it, and how did you know that you had felt it?

I could see the power of Tai Chi. That was obvious. When Ohtsuka sensei threw someone up against a wall with a simple push, that was power. No doubt about it. But how was that power manufactured and where did it come from? The answers to these questions escaped me. I was becoming technically better at Tai Chi and won or placed when entering tournaments, but I still felt that this was only the outside aspect of the art.

After each win, I was no closer to understanding this paradoxical art or feeling the chi than I had been at the beginning. To solve this problem and to truly understand my new art, I doubled my training. Each morning I woke up before work and went to a nearby park. There I would put on my walkman with a tape of the Tai Chi twenty-four move music and practice until I could do it in the required time of six minutes, nine times out of ten. I would mark my spot and come back to it each time. I isolated moves from the form and repeated them again and again until I had mastered them, then linked them together as a whole. I would practice the twenty-four move form and then move on to its sister form, the forty-two move sequence, practicing them in succession until they became one unitary whole, one beautiful flowing technique.

But the essence of Tai Chi still eluded me. Just because you are technically proficient doesn't mean you truly understand something. Sometimes it can impede your understanding of an art. You can be "technique stupid," and that is what I was becoming. I was doing modern-sport-style Tai Chi, but something was missing. How could I be winning tournaments and not feel the energy of chi? My movements looked good but felt artificial. There was no warmth in the extremities of my body, and I knew that this was an important part of development in Tai Chi Chuan.

I stayed with Ohtsuka sensei for some time, then left her dojo. There are times when you must make such a decision. It is a thing of the intuition, the heart, not of the head, and ometimes you must trust your heart. I could have stayed at Ohtsuka sensei's dojo, winning medals and trophies for years. But it would have been a lie, and I wanted the truth. I wanted to know two things: What was the original Tai Chi, the authentic Tai

Chi, and what was the true essence of the Chinese martial way? It was different in flavour and personality than the Japanese way, but how? What did it entail, and what would it mean for me if I embraced it? I was both entranced and frightened by the possibilities. For years I had invested in the Japanese warrior's way. What would it mean to switch allegiances and think differently? Would I lose myself and all I had been? What would I use for a personal anchor, if Bushido was gone?

But we cannot stop because a path may be difficult. Deep inside, I already knew that things were changing, that I was shedding the skin of twenty-three years of training and moving in a different direction. Yet at the same time I clung to the past. Karate was familiar to me, the only home I had ever known. Now I was leaving it and did not know where I would end up.

In a strange way it was wonderful. I was entering a new world, and I didn't have to think in old ways. The new world seemed bigger to me than the old. It involved more ancient teachings. It embraced flexibility. In real fighting, weapons are a constant, a garbage can lid, a pop bottle, a club, or knife, all are used without discrimination. I began to question the traditional karate viewpoint. Did it make sense?

Chinese teachers encourage students to train widely. I had been urged to broaden my knowledge and study with others. If one way was not enough, you were told to seek the knowledge of others. For me this was revolutionary. It felt strange, but also liberating. I could study both hard and soft. I could learn one form from one style, and another from a different one. I could do whatever I wanted, and freedom like that was a liberation of the spirit. Suddenly it was all right to approach the martial arts from a different perspective.

Now I had a chance to study other arts I had been interested in. What was traditional kung fu like, with its long and complex forms? For that matter, what was Bruce Lee's art of Jeet Kune Do like? Now I could study them without betraying anyone. In this new world of the Chinese warrior way I could liberate myself. A very long and significant journey had begun.

I reach the edge of Kichijoji and enter the park. Inokashira park is very beautiful. It is autumn, and "Koyo," the time of the falling leaves. For all the autumns I have been in Japan I have gone somewhere, by myself or with Jocelyn, to be part of it. It is hard to explain, the passing of the seasons in Japan, for to understand it you must experience it.

Now, after all these years, it seems right that the beginning of each season should be observed and honoured. Doing so makes you a part of it. Spring becomes summer, which becomes fall, then winter. You should observe and celebrate each season. You should take part in it: in the fall, persimmons and falling leaves: in the winter, oranges and green tea under a kotatsu: in the spring, the birth of plum and cherry blossoms: and in the summer, the tinkling of bells, ice cream, and fireworks in the heat. Each season has its special way.

Autumn is the season I like most. There is none of the sweltering heat of summer or strange cold of the Japanese winter. Autumn has an understatement about it, a quiet elegance. It is a season of beginnings in dying. As the riotous spirit of summer ends and the death of winter begins, autumn occupies the place of rest. It is easy to contemplate, walking among the falling leaves and taking in the aroma of earth and rain. It is easy to rest

and find peace. But it is also easy to begin, to start something new, a new cycle before the withdrawal of winter.

I walk over Inokashira bridge and watch the ducks on the surface of the lake. It is quiet at this time of the day. The weekend visitors haven't yet arrived. I climb up the hill and, with my small pack and my broadsword wrapped in its case, pass through the first part of the park and into the suburb that lies between it and the second section. It is a typical Japanese neighborhood and could be anywhere in Tokyo. One of the features of this city is that it is nondescript. On the surface, one area is the same as any other. You could just as easily find this suburb in Ebisu or Meguro as here. The same gray streets and small shops, the same vendors and residential homes. There is comfort in sameness. I have been here for years. Predictability gives security, and the wild swings of belief that characterize the individuality of the West are not as attractive for me as they once were. For now, on this day, there is comfort in being part of the Japanese world.

I pass by the familiar fence that separates the second part of Inokashira from the streets and walk onto the dusty trail that leads to my destination: an open clearing at the edge. I have come to see Derek Morris. Two travellers on the warrior's path are about to meet. Though we have different backgrounds and personalities, and we have studied different arts, our viewpoints are similar. We are both passing from the hard to the soft way, and we both love the way of the warrior. But this is not karate. It is the way of kung fu, and I am stepping into new territory. My karate is still useful, but it will not help me to master kung fu. First, I must empty my mind of the old ideas of power and strength and embrace softness. The hard angular movements of Shotokan will not work

for me in kung fu. In kung fu you must flow like water. For me this is a strange concept. I understand it intellectually, but my body and mind cannot always grasp it.

I have come to practice Hsing I. Hsing I, one of the three great internal arts of China, is Derek's specialty. It has the hardest nature of the three great soft arts, being the most linear and direct, but is still soft, depending on the cultivation of the internal organs and chi. It is not hard kung fu, but it is also not Tai Chi. Derek has been studying it for years and has agreed to begin teaching me. It is demanding and complex but worth the effort. If I study it, I will have a starting point from which I can ascend to the next level of martial skill.

As I walk down the path, I hear the sounds of Hsing I practice and can see the small puffs of dust rising from Derek's movements. I sit down on a bench and place my pack and sword under it. For a while, I watch him in the shared understanding of those who have given their lives to the martial way. There is a hunger in me to know this new art. It is always this way for serious martial artists. Whenever we see a new form or art, we want to know it, to add it to our way of seeing things and to our arsenal of techniques. Many of us are martial arts fanatics, living for this one thing to the exclusion of all else. I do not consider myself to be so, but I have elements of that feeling. I thrill to the new techniques and to the rhythm and grace of the movements.

With each punch Derek performs the bamboo step, feet coming close together in a skidding step, lending vibration to the techniques and adding chi and body dynamics to the move. Hsing I is subtle power. Literally translated it means "Mind-Body Fist." It

connects the internal and the external in a web of power manifested in the body, but the true source is the mind.

Hsing I is a different art from karate. The mind comes first, then the body. It is true, to give karate its due, that you cannot do well at the higher levels if you do not integrate mind and body, but because karate freezes a person at the level of speed and power, it can be rigid. Because they more successfully integrate body and mind, arts like Hsing I and Tai Chi are refreshing. They are softer and wiser. The movement from karate to Hsing I, from hard to soft also reflects the changes in me. I am changing as a man, and as a person. A decade before I needed the overt power of karate to demonstrate that I was masculine and powerful. Now it is unnecessary. Now I need to know what is truly significant. I am past the stage of raw power and entering the realm of personal development. What is power? What is accomplishment? I feel more powerful now at thirty eight than I did at twenty four. How is this possible? Move for move, I was faster and stronger then, more supple, and had more stamina. But somehow now I am better. I waste less energy and am able to turn the opponent's power against him. My timing is better and more precise, and I have fewer illusions. A twenty two-year-old is much stronger and faster. That is the age to win tournaments and collect trophies, but I have no need of trophies. There are better and more important prizes to reach for.

Derek finishes up his last technique. I pick up my broadsword and walk toward him. He smiles as we meet. We exchange a few pleasantries, and then give each other the kung fu salute. It is a universal sign, right fist wrapped in the left palm, then both hands extended outward. In this way, Chinese martial artists, in particular kung fu people, know

each other. The meaning of the sign is profound. The palm represents the paper of the scholar, the fist is the fist of the warrior. Together these two symbolize the fully accomplished person.

We start our practice with the San Ti stance. It is the foundation of all Hsing I and a special stance, known as a jong. In Chinese, “jong” means a wooden post. The character contains the meaning of standing firm, and the practice of holding jong is a staple of all true Chinese martial arts. Years later, I would find Chinese martial artists in North America who had never heard of the word and did not understand the concept. It would be like mentioning arithmetic to mathematicians and having them scratch their heads in bewilderment. Some would deny the existence of holding postures or say that their martial art did not have one. But without them, there is nothing because there is no foundation. Jong, holding the stationary postures, develops the legs, and the legs are the roots of the tree of practice. They lengthen the breathing and circulate the chi. The posture, whichever posture it is, represents the essence of the style. The jong for Hsing I is grueling. Placing eighty percent of your weight on your back leg, you assume a kind of back stance in which you position your hands in the guard stance of the Hsing I style. Then you stay there, breathing deeply, and finally, after a lengthy period of time in which your legs burn with exhaustion, you switch to the opposite side .

Derek and I begin our workout with the Hsing I stationary posture . There, in the wordless beauty of Inokashira park, with the wind whipping dust and leaves around us, we stand. I begin to feel the “burn” in my thighs. As the minutes drag on I feel my back and shoulders tense and must will them to relax. This too is part of the training. I must

use my mind to overcome the pain. Without it, I will not survive the San Ti position, for it drags on for what seems like hours. Every martial artist knows this kind of pain. It is a good kind of suffering, the kind that makes you stronger and forges your character, but it is no less difficult for me, as a warrior, than it would be for an untrained person. As a martial artist, I am more familiar with it, but the pain is the same. In the end it is your mind which helps you, and it is your character which is the deciding factor.

Perfection of character is the essence of the warrior's way. Funakoshi, the founder of karate said it well in his master text *Karate Do Nyumon*: "After training in the freezing cold of winter and the sweltering heat of summer, who can find difficult an exam or occupation, and one finding them so is hardly worthy to call himself or herself a warrior." This is the conviction by which I have lived my life. As a karateka, it had been my creed. Now I was a different man, married, and not fighting to survive each day, wondering whether or not each practice would be the one in which I would lose my teeth. The spirit of the karateka was still in me, but now I was severing my connection to formal karate practice.

Now I was different, and the quest was different. I was walking a different path and beginning to wonder which other directions that I would like to explore. In a way it was like moving from a state of war to a kind of questing truce. Tentatively, and carefully, I explore the terrain of this newer and more intricate way of life. Compared to my first visit to Japan, it was alive with possibilities. Yet, at the same time, it was also calmer and more stable. In the wild melee of karate, I had somehow lost my sense of personal

development. Here, practicing Hsing I in the sunshine, I feel that I am once again reaching for something more than fighting prowess.

We have finished San Ti, and even though we are tired, we are also invigorated. We begin the first line of technique called the Ying Jao or “eagle hand,” Moving forward in San Ti, we shift and step. Our hands simultaneously defend and attack, the trademark of Hsing I. We move forward and then retreat, move forward again and then pull back, as we make our way across the clearing. I am filled with joy at being able to practice this exquisite art. At the other end of the park, we turn, step forcefully into a San Ti posture in the opposite direction, and the true practice begins, for Ying Jao is only the opening sequence of the practice of five elements fists. Now we begin the real practice.

The sequence unfolds with the first of the five elements: metal. It is called Pi Chuan, or metal fist. We close our open hands, turning them into fists, and chop down as we step, the hard metallic nature of the technique reflecting its name, the element reflected in the movements of our body. Next fire, broad and expansive, licking out in reflective tongues of dart-like motion. We shift and turn again, and it is time for wood, the most difficult of the five, our strikes solid like the branches of an oak tree, only the bamboo step separating each one. At the end of the sequence, we sink into a low crouch. It is a deep posture, far more challenging than anything either of us have had done in the past. Derek slips into it easily. He has been to China many times and has more experience than I.

We hold the crouch for a while, rise up slowly, take the San Ti posture again, and finish the line. There is an elegant change to the intermediate Kuo position, hands held in a

posture of readiness at our bellies, then we transmute the elements and are water, flowing but at the same time dynamic and penetrating. The familiar sound of our sliding steps punctuates each strike. Water gives way to earth, the double hand position mimicking the covering qualities of soil, and finally, we pull together the last posture and end the line with a standing posture and a laugh of satisfaction. Although two men could not be more different, we share this thing that men and women have loved for thousands of years. Even though the art is new to me, the feeling of satisfaction is old. Already I love it. Practicing kung fu is like discovering a distant cousin—you don't know them well but delight in the new friendship. It is as though you have found a rare book on a subject you thought you once knew, but now realize that you did not.

It is all of this and more. It is a way of life: the kung fu way. An old saying states that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. For me teachers are beginning to appear everywhere. I know that this signals something important, some kind of significant change, but I am not yet sure what it is.

After a short rest, Derek and I switch from empty-handed Hsing I training to the broadsword form, moving and swiping with the single-edged weapon in ways I have never before encountered. As a karate sensei, I had disdained weapons. I thought of them as a kind of weakness, representing an inability to make the empty hand interesting enough. As a youth, I had felt that weapon wielders were flashy showoffs. Now I am deeply impressed by the power of weaponry and the challenge it presents. By degrees I am allowing myself to explore a more complete way of the warrior.

I am excited by the possibilities and feel that it is the right way to go, but I miss something about karate-do. That something is the sense of a proper place of practice and correct martial trappings. In Japanese budo there is a sense of the “rightness” in the dojo. The polished wood floor with its bright sheen, the stark clarity of the bare walls with their simple unadorned surface: *shibui*, *wabi*, and *sabi* understatement, simplicity, and rusticity. Here there seems little or nothing of the understated grace of the dojo. Kung fu, both internal and external, is wonderful, but complex and convoluted.

In karate, a punch is simply a punch, straight, powerful, and strong. In kung fu, the techniques are intricate and complex, and power transmutes from one technique to the next. Like water, the ultimate Taoist element, the techniques flow one into another. Martial energy is summoned and then expelled, in bursts of power called “fa jing” landing on the surface of an opponent, or penetrating deeply into their internal organs. At the hands of a master, fa jing can crush or kill, or manifest itself in death or sickness. Seemingly soft palm strikes drop rugged men in their tracks, and hard hitting punches can be effortlessly absorbed by masters of the internal arts. A simple grasp can cripple a nerve point and incapacitate a foe, or the kung fu master may simply not be there when the opponent’s strike arrives. As their adversary, you never know.

This is the world I am entering, a different one from the world I have left. To survive and learn in this world, I need more complex skills than those I used in the Hoitsugan and central dojo. I need to look deeply, to investigate the complex web of relationships that lies below the surface of things, in particular, the appearance of physical power, and for me, this is a new world, one I have, up to now, only seen

glimpses of. What is the relationship between healing and mortal combat, the occupation of the warrior? How are health and fighting related, and why am I disturbed and at the same time thrilled by the violence of the warrior's way? How is it that in this Chinese way of combat, an apparently weak old man can render a young one helpless and destroy him? Is it the personification of the dictums of Lao Tsu that the weak overcomes the strong, and the soft the hard, or is it a matter of technique easily explained without the overlay of philosophy or religion? I struggle to answer these questions and wonder, once again, why all of this is so hard for me and why I feel the need to pursue it in the first place.

As the afternoon light fades, Derek and I start the last section of of Hsing I training: two-man sparring. In this set, each of the elements contests another, a fire attack is met with a water defence. Metal overcomes wood, and wood contains and then defeats earth. We shift back and forth, stepping and attacking in moves that reflect the complex interplay of the five elements, the Chinese concept of the universe manifesting itself in martial form. The powerful and elegant attacking and defending moves are a demonstration of the laws of nature.

Derek delivers the last wood strike to my abdomen, and I block with metal, covering him and then attacking. We finish by pulling up into the standing kuo position, eyeing each other with contained power, then ending the sequence and giving each other the kung fu salute. It is pleasant once again to be involved in something resembling harder martial arts. Although Tai Chi has taught me a great deal, the hard styles present something that cannot be duplicated. We are both aware of it. We have long backgrounds

in karate, he in Goju Ryu, I in Shotokan, but both in the way of the empty hand. We are different, yet there is something complementary about us. When we spar, I am the technician with whip-like ,clever technique, he is the straightforward fighter relying on power and strength. Sometimes I can neutralize his power. At other times, he is too much for me and crushes through my defences, negating my speed and technique. Watching us is like seeing the contradiction of opposites manifested in human form.

There are many qualities marking us as different. Derek has a kind of wisdom I do not have. It is the wisdom of experience no amount of education can give you. It is the experience of the streets many girlfriends and street fights; of disappointments and bad moves and the crushing weight of being working class. But it is also the wisdom of generosity, a largess that is deep and powerful. When I am with him I feel I have much to learn.

And I have a wisdom that Derek can't grasp. It is the wisdom of the mind, of refinement and reading the classics, of taking what the great philosophers and scholars have said and trying to apply it to your life. It is the knowledge that a life lived well is a great joy, sharing in the collective knowledge of the great thinkers that can transform you in a way daily life cannot. When he is with me Derek also feels that he may have missed something.

The truth? Both viewpoints are illusions. Derek's working class roots, and the resentments and defensiveness that go with them, are false, and my intellectuality and unnamed issues with my own upbringing are unnecessary. But here in the park, doing Hsing I, we are able to transcend them, stay in the moment, and be truly alive. This is the

gift of the martial way and of the generations that came before us. As we walk out of the park to go to lunch, I am thinking of how I can reach beyond the world of martial arts and into the world of healing. I do not know, as the sun breaks through the clouds, that I will soon meet a man who will show me this world in a way I had never expected.

*1936: Guangdong Province, China*

Young Chen is tired and hungry. He has joined a gang of orphans, and here, in the streets of Canton, they scavenge for anything they can get. He is thin, sixteen, and desperate. Three months ago the Japanese army killed his mother and father, non-combatants whose only crime was to getting in the way. He hates the Japanese with a passion but can do nothing about his parent's deaths. It is hard enough to stay alive. He is doing a fair job of it, but that is all. Stealing food from restaurants when patrons aren't looking, picking pockets, and quickly rifling through garbage cans are about the only ways he can make it.

He is one of millions of Chinese whom war has displaced. The invading Japanese and the ongoing struggle between the Communists and the Nationalists have made their lives a living hell. Chen does not understand the political struggle, he only knows that the love he once knew has been brutally destroyed and that he has no place he can call home. He is tough and resourceful, but not one of the boys who terrorize others. When he fights, he either wins or breaks even, swinging and kicking wildly at his opponents and at the demons that haunt him. The streets are making him hard, but the odds are against him. Every day, in the alleyways and narrow streets around him, hundreds die. He is no

stranger to death. Here in Canton it is better than Shanghai and the northern cities where thousands die each day of disease, brutality, and starvation.

Chen wonders if he will ever see peace again. In his heart he cries for his mother and father, but cannot afford to show it to those around him. Those who cry die. As he stands with the others looking out into the street and spies the ragged figures around him, he becomes aware of the differences that fortune, wealth, and power bring, and of the despair that the absence of them bequeaths. Occasionally he sees a foreign car bounce by with its opulently dressed occupants. Always “gwai low”, white people, foreign devils, dressed beautifully, not bothering to look at the Chinese around them, as though his own people did not exist, the very people from whom they have profited. The foreigners have built an empire on the labour, commerce, and death of the Chinese, but do not consider them human. China, his China, is like a victim being ravaged, at first by the Europeans, and now by the equally rapacious, grasping, Japanese troops—an Asian ravager to rival the Westerners who have already staked their claim.

Chen steps out into the broken cobble streets and lights a cigarette. He began smoking a couple of months ago. He inhales deeply. What does it matter whether he smokes or not? There is no one there to approve or disapprove. There is no one to protect his health or show him another way to live. Those who would have cared are gone now, ghosts and memories. It doesn't matter. In the three months since he was thrown into the streets, he has had to do more, and has seen more, than in the previous sixteen years of his life.

He can feel his heart hardening. No one here even knows that his first name is Yao, Yao Kwai. "Kwai La." That was what his mother used to call him. "Kwai La, get up, you'll be late for school." "Kwai La, go to the market and get me some dumplings." "Kwai La, your shoes aren't tied." "Kwai La, why are you so slow?" "Kwai La, good boy, I love you." There is no one to call him "Kwai La" now. He is simply "Chen" or sometimes "Long Arms Chen" because of his reach and height; and he is no longer a good boy. The shopkeeper they surrounded and beat up last night would not have thought so. They left him lying there unconscious, while they took his money. When you are as hungry as Chen is there is no reason to be delicate, and you cannot afford the luxury of being squeamish. He and his friends had not eaten for three days. The shopkeeper's money bought them enough rice and tea to make it through the rest of the week and the luxury of a little meat.

Today he is going to meet Wong, a member of the Green gang. If he can get together with him, he could be on the verge of joining the Canton chapter of the largest and most powerful gang in China. That could mean more food and money than he has known for months and maybe even a place to sleep. As he walks through the streets, he tries to imagine what it would be like to be able to relax again. The life he has now is nothing, less than nothing. Living like this from rat hole to rat hole, fighting for scraps, fighting period, is not a life. He is not stupid. He knows his time is limited. Sooner or later you will go down. Whether it is to some thug's knife or starvation does not matter. You will fall.

An hour later he returns to his gang. Wong did not show up. He probably thought it was not worth meeting a sixteen year-old kid. Chen is disappointed. It may not have been the best decision to join the Green gang, but at least it would have given him something. Now he has to return to the emptiness of the streets. As he walks up to the rest of the gang members, he sinks to the ground, leans up against the brick wall of the street front, and looks out numbly into the darkening streets. There are fewer people now, and he can make out individuals. Suddenly one of them catches his eye. The man is walking down the street with a look of quiet confidence. His posture is straight, but not stiff. He looks out evenly into the crowds, and though he is not noticed, he stands out among them.

Chen cannot take his eyes off the stranger. The man is dressed in blue robes and makes his way toward the boys slowly and carefully, yet with barely subdued power. Chen knows that the blue robes mean the stranger is a Taoist priest. What is a Taoist priest doing in the streets of Canton? Chen watches him as the priest weaves his way through the crowds of street people until he is very close to the gang of boys, then he looks away.

When he looks up again, he is surprised to find that the priest is standing in front of him. Chen gazes blankly at him. He is a figure from China's past, a remnant of the rich tapestry of the Old China. The priest tells them that his name is Yim Poi and that there is a better place for them. Tough, but better. He asks them how many would like to come with him and live in a Taoist monastery. Chen stands up with six other boys who decide they want to go. Anything is better than this life on the streets. As they walk out of

Canton following Yim Poi, Chen wonders where he will end up. He does not know that the place he is going will be, not miles, but centuries, out of his way.

*The Monastery of the Yellow Dragon*

It has been three years since Chen followed Yim Poi to the Yellow Dragon monastery. Of the six boys who originally came, he is the only one left. In those three years many things have changed. In the outside world, the war rages on. The Japanese have triumphed, and Mao Tse Tung's communist army fights to survive, suffering tremendous losses, but winning more and more people's love and loyalty. Armies clash, and people live and die. To Chen, it is a storm that rages outside the meditation halls and temples of the Yellow Dragon.

Inside the temple are the age-old rhythms of Taoist life. Chen cleans and sweeps, and gathers wood and water. He is Yim Poi's disciple, and follows him on his tasks, learning a little each day. The centuries-old rituals continue as they always have, and monks are taught the scriptures and delve into the mysteries of Taoism. Chen has long since forgotten life on the streets. Here there is peace.

Still, he is not entirely content. One day, in exasperation, he asks Yim Poi when he will learn the secret temple ways. Expecting to be reprimanded for his impatience, he is surprised when Yim acquiesces and begins to teach him simple forms, something called chi kung, the art of maintaining and building the body's energy. It is the foundation of the higher arts, and the beginning of the way of harmony. Each day he continues his menial tasks, but he also practices the twelve shen postures, a series of moves and stationary

postures which are the beginning chi kung of the temple system, the Tao Ahn Pai or Taoist elixir style. Chen has to hold a stationary posture and breathe in a certain way, tongue on the roof of his mouth, breathing lightly, sending the breath in an imagined pattern from one energy point to another on the pathway referred to by the ancients as the microcosmic orbit. Gradually his breath begins to deepen and his mind becomes sharper. The shen, the energy of thoughts and intellect, is refined and developed with each posture.

Chen continues in this way, not for a week or a month, but for five years. Each day he performs the rituals, sweeps and cleans, and practices the Shen. Yim Poi will show him nothing more. At the end of his fifth year, he is physically and mentally balanced, then, for another two years, Yim Poi teaches him the rest of the Tao Ahn Pai way. By the time he is twenty three he is supple, strong, and powerful. The Taoist martial arts have made him alert and resourceful, able to bring down a man much larger than himself with a single blow or handle multiple opponents if he should need to. He is a master of weapons, especially the walking cane and staff, and wields both with blinding power and speed.

As he builds up his disciple's martial arts skill, Yim Poi also teaches him the ways of healing. During long walks in the hills, the herbs and healing knowledge of the temple are revealed to him, and it is this, along with his strength, that makes him a balanced person: a spiritual warrior. On the streets of Canton there are many who possess great fighting skills. Scrapping in the back alleys and barrooms of the old quarter, they are tough and vicious. But they do not have what Chen has. There are limits to what they can

do, and how far they can develop themselves, and there are no such limits for Yao Kwai Chen. He has begun to tread the path of the immortal.

*1949*

Thirteen years have passed since the frightened sixteen year old boy who was once Yao Kwai Chen came to the Yellow Dragon monastery. In his place there now stands a young Taoist master. Chen has completed all of the martial and meditative practices of his master and those of the temple as well. He has memorized the ancient scriptures and performed the ceremonies of his sect countless times. He is a master in his own right. His eyes are bright and alive. His respiration is deep and effortless. For over a decade he has not eaten meat, consumed alcohol, or touched anything violating the laws of the Tao. Now his chi flows powerfully along his meridians, and his love for Yim Poi, never spoken of, is deep and abiding.

He does not want to leave the Yellow Dragon. The things happening outside its walls do not interest him. Yim Poi has hinted that some of the war and insanity may soon reach them, but Chen does not think about it. He is happy here. The daily rhythm of temple life is now life itself. The routine of the Yellow Dragon blends work and spiritual practice into a seamless web of awareness. From the moment he wakes up to the moment he finishes the "earth meditation" at night, his every waking moment is lived in the Tao.

In the afternoons, he practices the flowing temple style of kung fu with his fellow monks. Attack and defend, punch and strike, he flows like water, each move flowing effortlessly into the next. He has learned wisdom and peace from practicing the temple

style and his master's chi kung. He is practical, but in a way that transcends the cruelty that once filled each day.

Seasons pass, and chores must be carried out, food gathered, floors swept, water carried, but this supreme practicality is carried out without the passions of outside existence. Chen has learned this from his teachers. Yim Poi has held back only one lesson from him, and now, as summer turns to fall, he decides to teach this last lesson to his young pupil. It is dramatic, but necessary, and it is meant to both inspire Chen and show him his limitations.

One day, as Chen watches, Yim Poi walks down a long corridor and into a windowless, doorless room. He instructs him to stay at the end of the corridor and to make sure that no one enters, telling him that if he watches carefully, he will learn a lesson of great importance. Chen stands watch as his beloved master climbs onto a meditation dais and assumes the half lotus position. For an hour nothing happens, and Chen begins to wonder why his teacher has chosen to play this strange joke on him. Then, taking his eyes off the room, he glances down the road leading to the temple and reels in shock as he sees Yim Poi walking toward the main temple complex. His head snaps back to the room, and there is his master still meditating in exactly the same place as before. As he sees Yim Poi fade into the distance, and then sees him again on the dais, he realizes that he has been witness to something few will ever see. A strange feeling takes hold of him. He feels a longing to reach his master's level and at the same time a fear of him. Overwhelmed, he sinks to the floor, motionless, and waits, with his head on his forearms, while Yim Poi continues meditating. After another hour has passed, the master climbs down from the

dais and walks down the corridor, his eyes on his young disciple. He radiates compassion and, for the first time, takes Chen's hands in his own.

He tells Yao that he has never shown this to any other student, that his body remained in the meditation chamber and that it was his spirit Chen had seen walking down the road. For a long moment, he looks into the young man's eyes, then sadly tells him that this kind of accomplishment is not for him, that he will never reach this high a level, but that he must work hard for the benefit of others, and that to do so will be the fulfillment of his destiny and the best way he can follow the Tao. Unashamed, Chen breaks down in tears, crying unreservedly for love of this man who has given him so much. He knows that, someday soon, they will part. One week later, the abbot of the temple calls Chen and asks him if he would like to join his uncle in the States. He tells him that the temple elders feel he would be safer there. Chen thinks for a moment, and then tells the abbot that he will go, but asks a final question: "What is the States?"

*Shibuya, 1993: The Dojo of Wang Shu Chin*

I have been practicing Tai Chi for quite a while, but somehow something is missing. I have enjoyed my time with Ohtsuka sensei and have learned a great deal from studying the twenty four move form, but I am restless and dissatisfied. There is a lack of vigour in her Tai Chi. When I began to study it, I was looking for a way to achieve softness, to break with the hard fighting mentality I grew up with. Now I realize that I have been trying to fill the gap left by the loss of karate and bushido, "the way of the warrior." Practicing Hsing I with Derek is helpful. Halfway between hard and soft, full of

the complexity of the Chinese way, Hsing I is more stimulating than Ohtsuka's Tai Chi. But it is not the same as the dynamic karate I knew. I feel liberated, but miss karate's dynamism.

To solve the dilemma, I look for another Tai Chi school. The legends of Tai Chi describe it as the ultimate fighting art, invincible when practiced and applied correctly. But I cannot see this in Ohtsuka or her advanced students. Where is the Tai Chi I have read about? Has this kind of art disappeared?

I decide to try and find out. I have heard that there is a dojo in Tokyo's Shibuya district that practices a different kind of Tai Chi. On a cold Saturday, in December 1993, I find myself threading my way through a maze of streets near Shibuya station. I enter a small side street and find a sign above a basement door, which announces in Chinese characters that this is a dojo of the "soft fist" Chinese martial arts. I go down the single flight of stairs, through a small twisting hallway, and up to a door, which has a sign in Japanese saying "Tai Chi Chuan." An old man is sitting at a desk. I step into the dojo and realize that I have made a mistake. It is December 31st. Because tomorrow is New Year's Day, no one will be there. I start to step back out the door, mouthing an apology in Japanese, when the old man calls me back in perfect American English.

As he stands up, I see that he is dressed in a worn Chinese kung fu uniform. He is alone in the room, and I know that I have come to the right place. Something about him gives me the feeling that I am in the presence of a master. For a few moments, I look around the dojo. It is worn and functional and seems to have character. Weapons racks surround the walls. There are charts of the Tai Chi Chuan, Hsing I, and Pa Kua

movements. A small library of old books sits above the desk the old man is sitting at. There is a series of training maxims on the walls, and the smell of sweat permeates the room.

These are good signs. For a dojo to function well, it must be simple and sincere. This one seems that way. I walk back into the dojo in response to the old man's request. It startles me to hear him speak perfect English, and I tell him so.

"You speak English well," I say.

"Well, anyway I speak it," he replies. "I am Motoko Toyama."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Perry Foster."

I look at him a little more closely, taking in the details of his face and clothing and remembering the dictum of Funakoshi Gichin, that a true martial artist shows no sign of indecency. There is little that might give me reservations about this man. He is balding and a little round-shouldered, but his eyes are clear and bright, and he holds himself with the curiously erect and prepared posture that accompanies a martial artist of the first rank. He returns my look, undoubtedly making an assessment of his own, then asks me the question we both know is coming.

"Are you interested in Tai Chi?"

"Yes," I reply, holding back, careful not to add anything that might be construed as arrogant. Now he waits, eyeing me, and for a moment there is a kind of testing. It is the interval in which trained martial artists look for openings, and whether it takes place on the dojo floor or in a conversation, it is the same: testing and opening, advance and retreat, attack and defence. Toyama opens first.

“Have you ever done Tai Chi before?” It is a good first move. Many martial artists deny knowledge of a martial art they have studied so that there will be no preconceived notions about them. The martial arts world has its own set of prejudices and preconceived notions, and many rivalries exist between the different arts. If you declare yourself for one style or school, you may become the victim of these prejudices. Another reason to opt for anonymity is that a martial artist may wish to start a new art without any previous baggage. It is hard not to judge another martial art, but in the beginning, it is best to make no judgments. You should be like an empty vessel. If you are full of your own notions about what is or is not effective, about what is proper or improper, you may not be able to learn at all. Toyama is testing me, seeing how much previous experience I have. He already senses that I have ability. Now he is seeing if I will be honest about it. If I am not honest, he will know the moment I begin to practice.

“Yes, I’ve done some before,” I say. His response is immediate.

“Can you fight with it?” I am surprised by this statement. No Tai Chi instructor has ever asked me this before.

“Well, no,” I say. “They never taught us to fight.” Toyama snorts with laughter.

“No fighting. No Tai Chi. Twenty-four move right?”

“Pardon me?” I ask.

“I’ll bet you studied the twenty-four move form. They never teach you how to fight.” I don’t know what to make of this. For one thing it is unusual to hear a Japanese speak this way. This is pretty strong talk. But Toyama is speaking English, not Japanese.

He does not need to use honorifics or think like a Japanese. For him it is liberating to speak English. While speaking our tongue, he can speak directly.

“Well, they didn’t teach us how to fight, but it was still pretty demanding.”

“True Tai Chi is for fighting as well as health. Master Wang taught us that.”

Toyama pauses for a second, waiting for the effect of his statement to sink in. It is obvious that he is the teacher here, but I feel compelled to ask the question anyway.

“ You are the sensei of this school, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am, but the real instructor is Master Wang Shu Chin. He was my teacher for many years. He died two years ago, but here we follow his way of doing martial arts.”

Toyama pauses again. It is my decision at this point whether or not to proceed. I could thank him and leave, or I could stay and find out more about the school. Either way there would be no loss of face, but now was the time for a decision. I had to make up my mind. After a slight pause, I decide to stay.

“What kind of man was he?” I ask.

“Well, he was a great man. He came here in 1957, as an ambassador of Chinese culture. I first saw him then, and he demonstrated Chinese martial arts at that time. I had never seen Tai Chi before, and some of my friends and I decided to go and watch him.” I listen in silence as Toyama continues, “ He demonstrated great internal power, and I realized then that Chinese culture was the superior one.” For a moment I do not know what to say. I have never heard a Japanese admit this. They are usually adamant that their culture is second to none. In the field of martial arts, they never admit that any other nation comes close to theirs.

“What will I learn if I study here?” I decide to leave the subject of Chinese versus Japanese martial arts for another time.

“For one thing, you will learn how to *use* your Tai Chi for a change, but if you stay long enough, you will also learn how to do Hsing I and Pa Kua, two other Chinese martial arts.” I do not reply. I do not want to tell him that I am already studying Hsing I with Derek. Pa Kua is a subject best left for the future.

“Wang Shu Chin was a man who could use all of his arts,” he says. “In all the years I knew him I never knew him to lose. He easily defeated me when we first met, and I had already studied many of our traditional martial arts and had two black belt degrees. The martial arts you will learn here will be his martial way.” He waits in anticipation, but I say nothing. The challenge has been extended, and it is up to me to accept.

I thank him for his time, then get up and start to leave. He nods in thanks and I know that he is secretly thinking that I will not show up again. But he is wrong, for this is just the kind of school I want to study at, one in which fighting power is wed to the softness of the internal way. The kind of exclusively soft attitude I experienced at Ohtsuka’s school was not enough, and though she showed me a kind of strength, I realize that the way of the warrior is not entirely gone in me, and that a contradiction has not yet resolved itself.

### *Push Hands*

The following Saturday I wonder about this very contradiction. How can I hate fighting and enjoy the martial arts? How can this be? You cannot simultaneously enjoy

fighting and hate it. I am no closer to the answer to this question than when I struggled with it in the Hoitsugan. The only thing that I am sure of is that it is exhilarating, that doing the martial arts, in whatever form, excites and fulfills me. Sitting in my seat as the train jostles along, I promise myself that one day I will come to a resolution of this dilemma and that I will continue to practice martial arts until it appears.

I arrive at Toyama's dojo, bow in, then change behind a partition. I am a little nervous and practice a few deep breaths before walking out into the dojo. Experience tells me immediately which people have skill and which do not. The sub instructors are instantly recognizable, as are the seniors. All have a look of assuredness and poise. I am with the beginners, and we cluster at one end of the training hall, farthest back from the picture of Wang Shu Chin at the front of the room. It is a familiar ritual. The worn appearance and wooden walls of the dojo comfort me. They remind me of other places I have trained in.

The workout begins, with a senior leading us through chi kung exercises. I imitate those around me, doing my best to keep up. It doesn't surprise me that no one explains anything to me. I have been through this kind of thing enough to know that no explanation will be given. In Asia you learn by doing, and by thinking about what you have done, not by listening to someone talk. Sometimes this is frustrating for me, but I understand it.

After the chi kung, we move on to a Tai Chi form. I am taught the first four or five moves, then left to repeat it. After the solo practice, we beginners are shown the practical application of the moves, then asked to repeat the ones we have just been shown. We are told that this is the orthodox form, the first of three Tai Chi forms we will learn. Beyond

this nothing more is said. After we repeat the moves a few more times, we are called into two lines. Toyama sensei calls out a command in Chinese, and something that I will soon begin to dread starts. We begin the practice of “push hands.”

The Tai Chi equivalent of sparring, “push hands” is a contest of subtlety and internal power. Placing your right hand on the hand of your opponent, you push against it trying to slap or push your opponent on the chest. They, in turn, yield at just the right moment, and turn their body away, so that your hand goes past them, then they turn their wrist and push against you, the defender becoming the attacker in a see-saw movement of pushing and yielding. It is extremely difficult to master and requires a subtle mixture of balance, timing, and internal power. But without mastering it, you cannot know Tai Chi Chuan.

My first opponents are juniors, but after them one of the seniors takes their place. I push against the back of his wrist, and instead of yielding or demonstrating, he slams me back against the wall. I look at him, waiting for a reassuring nod or smile; and afterwards expect him to teach me what I have done wrong. Nothing. He waits, and when I push against him this time, his hand is immovable. Nothing I do can move him, and then, when I relax, he slams me against the wall again. I start to get angry, but just as we are about to start again, Toyama calls out for us to change partners.

With my next three opponents, all seniors, it is the same. They either push me down or slam me back against the wall. On the third, I feel the urge to strike back, but manage to see through the haze of anger and remind myself that dojos have rules. I also think, in the back of my mind, that these people might be better than I think they are. An

invitation to open combat might not be easy to back up. But it is humiliating, and especially so when I am pushed to the ground. I know that if I wanted to, I could instantly strike with a roundhouse or front kick to their groin or knee joint, but this just makes it worse. Knowing that I have the potential to deliver a lethal blow, and not being able to do so is unbearable. By the time Toyama calls a halt to the practice, I am angry and resentful.

We repeat the form as a class, and I am able to calm down, but the push hands is still on my mind. On the way home, my mind is full of imaginary rematches in which I use karate or Hsing I to defeat my opponents. I know that it is a useless exercise, and remind myself that I have come to Toyama's dojo to learn true Tai Chi, but it does not help. I am frustrated and want revenge. Once again I am left with the old contradiction. When I return to my apartment I am withdrawn and morose.

*Yamamoto*

At the next practice, I am keyed up and ready to go. I have had several days to think of ways to handle the seniors. In my mind I have rehearsed dozens of responses, and now I am sure that I will be able to handle anything they send my way. But what happens is even more humiliating and frustrating than before.

After forms practice, I pair up for push hands with a middle-aged woman. She looks like an easy opponent, and we start the customary initial movements, our bodies swaying together as we practice yielding. I feel her energy, trying to find an opening in her defence and determine her weak points. Does she yield too much, giving me a chance to

come back after she returns my push? Is she stiff at some point, revealing a rigidity that I can take advantage of? Does she use physical strength, giving me the chance to use breath and chi against her? All of this goes through my mind as I line up with her. Then I remind myself that she is, after all, a small, middle-aged Japanese woman. How difficult can it be to defeat her?

We pair up, and she gives me a slight smile. I decide to push immediately. The tactic is designed to throw her off balance and give me a quick advantage. Instead it is my undoing. She takes my energy and uses it to repulse me, yielding with a sinking motion at exactly the right moment, then pinning my hand against my chest and shoving me back. I am shocked and enraged. How can this frail woman do this to me? I have years of martial arts experience, and yet this tiny woman, probably a grandmother, has beaten me with ease. I try to rationalize it by reasoning that if this were a real fight, I could dispatch her no problem. But it is disquieting to know that I need to think this way about an aging woman.

Outside, in an abandoned alley, I kick a garbage can in frustration. My pain and anger are now palpable. Almost as soon as the kick is completed, I regret it and remind myself of the martial arts maxims that cautions against emotion or engaging in what the masters called “impetuous courage.” But there is no easy way to deal with a feeling of continuous defeat and humiliation. Here I am, a man with two decades of martial arts experience, being defeated by middle-aged women and old men. What is this thing called “chi” anyway? How can this be happening, and what the hell is going on? I am no longer even sure that I could defeat these people in an ordinary fight.

On the way home I think about this. I know that in life and in the martial arts, you must “invest in loss” and accept that defeat is part of the learning process. When I get home, I take a long bath and talk to Jocelyn. She is sympathetic, but reminds me that if I don’t really want to be in a place, then I should not go there and that perhaps this dojo is not for me.

I appreciate her advice, but something inside tells me that quitting would be wrong. There is something to learn here, and it is more than just the punishment normally meted out in the martial arts. Somehow the lesson is connected to a deeper truth, though I am not yet sure what it is. One of the lessons of the martial arts path is that when you are struck down, you get up.

The following Thursday I am back, and I do a little better than the previous session. The long form, which we do together at the beginning of each practice, seems more familiar, as does the chi kung set done at the start of the workout. The form is intricate and difficult, over ninety nine moves long. I am accustomed to shorter, sport-oriented forms, which usually have somewhere around twenty four to forty eight moves. It seems strange to be doing a complex style of Tai Chi that stretches on in the ancient way, an endless flow of moves and repetition.

When it is time for push hands I am apprehensive and cautious. The first two opponents are easy. I hold my own with both of them. Then I come up against a tall muscular man in his late twenties. He nods as we place our right feet opposite each other. As I lean forward, I press the back of my right hand against his, and, as I do, I feel a stronger push from him than the others. As I push against him, I recognize something in

his eyes that concerns me. I have seen this look before. It is a look of hatred, a look that has no place in the martial arts. This one hates whites. He is a bigot, and now he is my training partner. When training becomes a stage for personal vendetta, a grudge match, the purpose and meaning of the martial arts is violated.

When I push against him he pauses, then slams my arm against my chest and pushes me against the wall. Resentment and rage wash over me, and, in seconds, I am overcome with anger. Using my strength and greater height, I push back, and we struggle in the middle of the dojo. I hold my own, but am unable to gain an advantage because he knows the tricks of push hands better than I do. Every time I use my power to push him, he slips away or holds me off. Our sparring has become a personal struggle.

In true push hands the last thing you should do is use strength against strength. Both the meaning of the practice and the benefits are lost when it degenerates into a shoving match. Yet here we are, scuffling in the middle of the dojo. What causes this? Both of us know this is not the way to practice the art, but despite this, we continue. My opponent uses this opportunity to express his hatred of whites. In turn, I feel I can't afford to lose to someone like him, so I fight back, using my physical power against his superior knowledge and technique. We hate each other, and although I enjoy the confrontation the least, I am indulging in it in the same way that he is. I manage to brush my hand against his chest, which I count as a kind of triumph, and he pushes me back, muttering to the person next to him, who laughs in response. When we part, I see Toyama sensei watching us, taking careful note of the animosity that has crept into the

training hall. He knows that he must deal with it one way or another, or it could escalate into something more serious.

When the call comes from Sasamoto to end push hands, I am in an agitated state. Luckily, we do the form at the end of class, so there is time for me to calm down. I try to breathe and use the motions of the form to still my mind, but it is difficult. I catch my former partner looking at me, making deliberate eye contact, issuing a challenge. My first reaction is to look back and call him out, a choice sure to result in a fight, but I control the impulse and look away or force my gaze forward and away from him. I reason that this is the wisest course, and the price I have to pay if I do not want the situation to escalate. But it is not what I really want. I am using my training to avoid a confrontation, but I really want to destroy this man, to defeat and humiliate him in some fashion that will leave no doubt as to who the victor is. I want to crush and humiliate him in front of his peers.

At the end of the practice, I approach another foreigner, an Iranian who speaks English, and ask him who the man in the headband is. He says that his name is Yamamoto, and then he raises his eyebrows sardonically. Evidently he too has had trouble with him. This time I do not kick a garbage can or spend time thinking about why the dojo is so frustrating but instead, walk slowly through the streets of Tokyo, foregoing the train ride so that I can walk from Shibuya to Omotesando station. It is calming to stroll through the narrow streets I discovered eight years before, recalling my days with Keiko and with Fukuda Sensei at the J.K.A. It has a kind of soothing quality. I pass by the shops and inhale the rhythm of Japanese life, the bordered sidewalks with metal guard

rails, the rice and sake shops so close to the streets that they seem to be in the middle of them, the book shops crammed with comic books and popular magazines, the Pachinko parlors, and the audio shops.

I decide to stop at a coffee shop called “Renoir.” I order a cappuccino and sink into the nearest armchair. I need time to think about what to do. It is not a new problem. Yamamoto is no different from Winky, René, Brian, or any of the other Hoitsugan types. He is a stereotype: the martial arts bully. I have met him before, and now I must deal with him again. As with all bullies, the worst thing you can do is to back down or try to pretend a problem doesn’t exist. That would only encourage him. In the context of the martial arts, he would then take it upon himself to “teach” me about my lack of spirit, or try to “correct” my bad habits, all euphemisms for beatings and cruelty. As my coffee arrives, I know what I must do. But I am not happy about having to do it.

What is there, I ask myself, about the martial arts that creates this irreconcilable dualism? On the one hand, nothing does more to help make you a better human being. On the other, nothing is so senseless and brutal. Trying to deal with this paradox confuses me and makes me ask myself if I really want to be a martial artist at all. Why must there always be Yamamotos? No matter what dojo or kwoon I go to they are there. As I sip my coffee, I wonder if there is any way in which the better side of the martial arts can be expressed. Has all of my training amounted to an inevitable admission that might makes right and that a punch in the mouth or being dropped on your backside silences any higher development in the martial arts? As I put down my coffee cup and prepare to leave, I am forced to admit that this might indeed be the case. Yamamoto must be stopped.

At the next practice we meet again. Yamamoto wears a slight smile. He mutters something I cannot catch and places his wrist on mine. This time he pushes and I yield. I have a little surprise for him, courtesy of a friend of mine who has practiced Tai Chi for years. I keep a small area of empty space between my arm and body, an inviolate zone alive with chi energy, which I do not allow him to penetrate. After several unsuccessful attempts at pushing me, he begins to get frustrated and, for the first time, looks at me directly. I cannot resist smiling back. Things have changed, and this does not please him. He tries to trick me, pushing with his palm and pointing downward with his fingers, like a karate spear hand. He plans to direct my energy downwards, then suddenly spring up, catching me unaware. I am ready for him, and lock my wrist, then twist to the side, pulling him with me so that his tactic is neutralized.

In frustration, he uses physical strength and tries to slam a palm heel strike into my chest. It is pure external martial art, Shaolin kung fu, not Tai Chi, and he knows it. Sensing that the time for our match is ending, I consider my options. Do I respond with Tai Chi or use something else? I know that I should stay with Tai Chi; that it would be the correct thing to do, but I am tired of this puffed-up bully. Instead of redirecting his energy, I lock his wrist with a grappling technique I have learned from kung fu and drop him to the floor. Toyama hurries over and demands to know what has been going on. There is a quick, sharp conversation in Japanese, and Yamamoto steps to one side nursing his injured wrist. The dojo is frozen, and everyone is watching. More than anything else, Japanese hate confrontation, and that is most definitely what has occurred. I know what is coming, but consider it to have been worth it in the long run. In preparation, I do my

best not to think of Toyama as an old man. I want to give the best account of myself and survive what is bound to be a one-sided contest. If I think of him as elderly, I will develop an unrealistically sympathetic attitude toward him and make myself even more vulnerable.

Everyone stares intently as Toyama sensei politely asks me if I would like to do a little push hands. There is nothing polite about it. This is a lesson, and it does not matter whether I am right or not. You don't violate the dojo rules with impunity and get away with it. As I cross wrists, I try to relax. I know that only by relaxing will I manage to escape with minimal injury and humiliation. I push first, but Toyama's hand does not move. There is an undercurrent of nervous laughter. Already he has made a fool of me. Then it begins. After letting me struggle with his immovable arm, he slams me backwards until I bump into a student behind me. There is little I can do about it. I cannot hope to equal him, but my pride will not let me quit, and in any case, I have little choice. This will end when he decides to end it, and not before.

I step back up to where he waits for me, arms down and relaxed as though I am nothing much, and, in this arena, he is right. This time he slips his hand over my forearm, and I resist as he lunges forward and the open web of his hand closes on my throat. For a moment I cannot believe this has happened. But, as he pushes me toward the mirror and lifts me off my feet, I have no choice but to believe. My body slams into the glass behind me, and I bounce off onto the linoleum floor. There is a deep, shocked silence. No one has ever been treated this way before. Toyama wastes no time and steps toward me, holding out his hand so that we can cross hands again. When I do so, he doesn't give me a chance

to push or respond. Instead, he drops his body weight low and comes at me from a new position: under my guard and below the waist. His palm slams into my lower abdomen, and I find myself lifted up into the air and land with a resounding thud onto the floor. The wind is nearly knocked out of me, but he is not finished with me. I stagger to my feet and step forward to meet him yet again.

This time we do a little push hands, and just when I feel it may be a normal bout, he overcomes me, his arm like iron, and slams his right hand into my chest. My lungs collapse and I drop to the ground. I lie there for a few moments, looking at the ceiling, unable to move. After their initial shock, people step in to help me, and after a few minutes, I try to take my original place in the line, but the lesson has been too effective. I am winded and can't do the final form. While the other students go through it, I sit in a chair in the corner of the dojo. Noone looks in my direction. It is as though I do not exist. I understand it because, from the point of view of the dojo, I should have known better. Inside, though, I am smiling. The beating was worth it. My behaviour was childish, but Yamamoto had it coming. Perhaps he will think twice, I tell myself, before he picks on another foreigner.

When Toyama calls the class to an end, I pick up my bag and leave after bowing out of the dojo. He does not look at me, nor I at him. The lesson has been given, and I am expected to understand the reasons why. That is the way of the dojo. In some small way I have gained the respect of some members of the dojo and of Yamamoto. I did not take his beatings or knuckle in to him. In the weeks to come, he tries to stay away from me, and our push hands practice is subdued and controlled. This is fine with me. I can learn

Tai Chi from others without being harassed by him. Toyama acts as if the incident has never happened, and for this too, I am deeply grateful.

*Drinking From the Pool of the Yellow Dragon*

There is a world of martial arts known as the Wu Lin. It translates from the Chinese as the “martial world”. In it there are many paths. It is a world within a world. Like a Russian Easter egg, you screw one open, and find more eggs within it. The Wu Lin is never what it seems. I was entering this world a little at a time. In April of 1992, a year before the altercation with Yamamoto, I met Sifu Chen. It would have been better to have called him Grand Master Chen by this time, but to do so would have made him laugh.

I met him through Derek Morris. He, and a New Zealander named Tony Roberts, were meeting in Yoyogi park to practice something called Lo Han Gung, a form of moving meditation based on the arts of the Shaolin temple. I was invited along, and enjoyed it immensely. For Tony, it was something his kung fu teacher had taught him, and he was just trying to keep his hand in. He was not really the teacher type, but he and Derek had a mutual friend, Thomas Fulton, a student of Chen. I talked to Derek and asked if I could come along to the seminar. He laughed, slapped me on the back, and said “of course.” Two martial brothers were working together, sharing knowledge and helping each other.

I had no idea at that time what such a seminar would entail. What would it be like to learn from a Taoist master? Since my days with John McDonald I had cherished a concept of what a “Master” was like. It had been tarnished when I came to Japan and saw

what many of the high ranking senseis were like. Like the loss of innocence that accompanies aging, I had been forced to accept the fact that my idealized vision of the martial arts was not real. Was the Wu Lin going to disappoint me, as my karate senseis had?

Chen came to Tokyo to teach the twelve shen exercises he had learned in the Yellow Dragon monastery. It had been some time since I had attended any kind of seminar. The last one had been a karate camp run along the same quasi-military lines I had come to expect from mainline martial arts. I still had the ethic of the karate practitioner, straight lines and sweat on a hardwood floor. There was a clear hierarchy. To treat your teacher with familiarity was a breach of the discipline code of the dojo. I did not want such familiarity. I believed in the way of the warrior, the chain of command, and the way of life it exemplified. The reason I had gone to Toyama sensei's dojo was because I missed that aspect of the martial arts. Going there meant that I had not yet made a commitment to another way of life. I was changing, but still a traditional warrior.

On the day of Master Chen's workshop, I did not know what to expect. I did not even know how to dress. That morning, I longed to have a karate uniform, to feel the familiar crispness of the white cotton, and to see my frayed black belt. It would have been wonderful to have the reassurance of the old days. But if I was to enter the world of the Chinese Wu Lin and change the way I saw and practiced things, I needed to leave the old patterns behind, so I chose a gray track suit and white tee shirt, packed a lunch in a backpack with a writing pad and pen, and headed for Naka Meguro where the seminar was being held.

Fulton lived in the bottom floor of a two-story residential complex. By Tokyo standards, it was spacious, with a bamboo garden just inside the outer walls of the building. As I pressed the doorbell, I wondered how he had managed to get an apartment like this and what he did for a living. The place spoke of wealth and privilege. I would find out later that the building had been purchased by Goldman Sax for their American employees in Japan and that Thomas worked for them. I was on unfamiliar ground again, a Canadian schoolteacher amongst American Wall Street expatriates.

A half an hour before the seminar was scheduled to begin, the room was already full of people. I sat down in a chair near the doorway and looked around. I was searching for two things: the feel of the room, and the look of the people. You can tell a lot about what is going to happen in a seminar by examining the place it is held and the people who are there. The room was magnificent. Large and open, it had dark hardwood floors and plenty of light from windows that ran from halfway up the room to the ceiling. There was an ornately carved altar table on one side of the room, with a Chinese feng sui mirror propped up against the backboard and several burning incense sticks. They were joss, the most common kind of devotional incense, and the blue smoke of their glowing embers filled the room. The feng shui mirror, used by Chinese to ward off evil or harmful influences, was beautiful. Unlike the cheaper kinds with red and yellow plastic stickers on them, this one had the trigrams of the I Ching carved directly into it and was hand-painted. It looked old and valuable.

I was seated next to a middle-aged Asian in a plaid shirt and light- blue track suit. For a moment, I continued to look around. I spotted Derek and waved, looked for Tony

and finally found him with his girlfriend Moko. Suddenly the man next to me struck up a conversation.

“Hi. How are you?” he said. He had a slight accent, the flavour of Hong Kong.

“Fine,” I replied. “It took me a while to get here. I thought I would never find the place.” He laughed.

“Yeah. All those Japanese streets. I had a hard time too. Where you from?”

“I’m Canadian from Vancouver Island.” The Chinese man crossed his legs the other way and smiled.

“Oh yeah. Vancouver. I went there in 1968. Big Chinatown. I liked it there, had a friend there and went to visit him. It’s beautiful there.” He smiled again, an open, broad, likeable smile. “I think it was Chinese New Year I went there, but I can’t remember now. They had some good people doing the Lion Dance I remember, though, and good restaurants.”

“Yeah,” I said. “They have great restaurants. You’re making me homesick.” He laughed again and stretched, a long natural stretch, arms up over himself like a cat. He gave a wide yawn, then slapped the arms of his chair and looked across the room at Derek and Thomas. “Okay, we start?” They both nodded back.

Suddenly, I realized what had happened, and I experienced the head-spinning, stomach-churning feeling of knowing that everything you thought you had known was wrong. The middle-aged Chinese man took off his plaid shirt. His tee shirt had a Chinese inscription, and I knew then that I had been talking to Yao Kwai Chen. I watched him as

he stepped to the middle of the room, relaxed and looking very much like an ordinary man with no training of any kind.

I had had no clue he was the teacher. Nothing had prepared me for the idea that this thin man, who did not look over forty years old, was the Taoist grand master Derek had spoken of. Chen had slipped in, unnoticed, and I had been having a casual conversation with him. I had thought that he was just another student waiting for instruction. For a moment I felt uncomfortable. Yet at the same time, I was fascinated. It had a certain way about it, a different feel from the karate dojos I had belonged to, or Toyama's Tai Chi school. Somehow there was a sense that formality was unnecessary.

Chen began by describing his life, Yim Poi, and his journey to America. He did not play the role of the "Great Master." Instead, he just told stories about things that he felt were important. I could feel that this was somehow very natural, that Chen's manner was not contrived or strained. As I sat there, I began to relax and realized that if I was to going to gain anything from the experience, I needed to lose my preconceived notions. For the next forty minutes, he spoke of the nature of healing, what it meant to be truly healthy, and what kung fu was. As the moments passed, I did not see his confidence falter once. He spoke not of something he thought to be true, but of something he knew to be fact.

Chen had a quality that distinguishes all true masters. You wanted to be around him. You wanted to learn from him for as long as possible and to be in his presence. I had felt the same thing while with Kanazawa and Fukuda, and now I felt it with him. I could feel the healing in it. It came through in the man, as a quality of his character, moulded by

the martial art. You were inspired to gentleness and good qualities by the personal qualities of the teacher. Here, with Chen , you could learn about healing itself.

He spoke about the nature of the human body, about how chi healed, how it had healed him, and more than this, of how he healed others, by projecting and manipulating it. He spoke of the nature of Taoism, how its essence was to emulate nature, how Yim Poi had lived to be over one hundred years old through honouring nature, learning from it, and practicing its principles. He told stories of the great Taoist immortal Lui Dung Bin, who had transcended normal existence and become an immortal through the practice of the Taoist way of life. He told us about the Yellow Dragon monastery and the practices he had learned there, of how the monks had taught him to observe Taoism in the animals, water and nature. Then he spoke of the twelve shen exercises, the foundation of his practice as a young man, and of how the monks and Yim Poi had taught them to him.

The exercises worked with something called Shen, the primordial nature of our thoughts. They were the gateway to the three treasures: the Shen, Jing, and Chi. We knew of Chi through Tai Chi Chuan, but there was more, much more. Chen spoke of the way in which we needed to cultivate all three of the treasures, not just one of them. In our lives, he said, one could become weaker than the others and lead to imbalance. Or one of the three treasures could become too strong, and we would once again find ourselves in an imbalanced state. Jing, too, was a treasure. It was the source of our primordial sexual essence. If we did not nourish it, we would soon lose vitality, personality and ambition. He explained that there were Taoist practices designed to strengthen one or another of the three treasures, even practices that were designed for special illnesses or deficiencies. The

Shen was a perfect example. As a group of twelve postures, they were good for cultivating the Shen throughout the body, but each of the exercises, six standing and six sitting, were also good for a specific body part or organ. They were a valuable practice and a good entry point to Taoist Chi Kung.

Chen went on to explain that his way was called the Tao Ahn Pai which meant the Taoist elixir style, and that its emphasis was on softness and natural, gentle movement. He said that, unlike other Taoist and Buddhist styles, which sometimes taught dangerous practices, you could not hurt yourself practicing the Tao Ahn Pai style. It flowed naturally, following the first principle of Chinese medicine: Do no harm. The exercises could be practiced individually, or in the normal sequence. Either way, they were valuable. If you practiced them regularly, even if for only a few weeks, you would become a different person: stronger, healthier, and more at peace.

After answering a question or two, he told us to stand up. We took our places in the room, far enough away from one another that we would not collide. Then we began the first Shen exercise. It scarcely seemed like movement at all. Standing in place, we stepped a shoulder's width to the left, then slowly, in time with our breathing, rose our arms to our sides until they reached shoulder height. At the topmost position the inhalation was over. The rest of the exercise was lowering our arms and exhaling. All of the breath, and it was only one cycle, was done with the tongue on the roof of the mouth, breathing in through the nose and out through it, softly and slowly, so that the breath could not be heard. It had to be gentle, a physical representation of the Taoist way, effortless, non-contending, and natural.

I was shocked to find that despite all of my years of training, the breathing was difficult for me. As with so many of my other experiences in the Chinese martial and healing arts, I was forced to admit that my understanding was superficial. Real breathing, controlled and conscious breathing, was beyond me. What did this mean? I had spent so many years on complex forms and techniques. Had I done so with an incomplete understanding? Facing up to a realization like that was difficult.

In all those years of karate, I had been practicing athletic movements, but without coordinating my breath. Could I really be said to have understood any of it? Now the connection between refined movement, health, breath, blood, and chi was apparent. They were connected. I could no longer deny it. My youthful quickness and endurance were diminishing. I could no longer depend on them to carry me. I was older and finding it more difficult to do multiple workouts and hundreds of repetitions of techniques. This was reason enough to look at myself, but there was also a deeper truth in all of it. Perhaps there was a different kind of power, something more subtle, and in some way more complete and stronger, than the power of muscle, speed, and bone. Perhaps it started with the breath.

For a moment, watching the sun filter down through the windows as Chen spoke, I remembered Kanazawa sensei. Had he gone through a similar experience, perhaps realizing that in the end hardness had its limitations, that as the famous quote from the Tao Te Ching states, “the soft overcomes the hard?”

Through the day we learned the remaining five standing Shen exercises. The more I did them, the more I realized that the term “exercise” was incorrect. In all of them the

same breath was used: lightly in through the nose, tongue on the roof of the mouth, the breath silent, deep, and long. This breath was fundamental to all Taoist practices. It was a true breath, deep and full, expanding the lower belly on the inhalation, contracting it on the exhalation, the same natural breath an infant takes while sleeping or lying in its crib. It gathered chi energy from the air and expelled toxins from every part of the body.

After the seminar ended, Sifu spoke to us again, this time about kung fu and how he first began to teach it to Caucasians in the early 1970s. He talked about how hard it had been, how white martial artists had pestered him, continually asking him what kung fu was. He had told them many times that he was unable to teach them because they were not Chinese. Finally, one of them, Johnny Bennett, a man already famous for his karate ability, had cornered Sifu and demanded an answer. Reliving it as he told us, he motioned with his arm in a beckoning way and said that he had told him to “come on, do your best.” Leoni had obliged him, and Sifu had dropped him to the ground with a technique from Choy Lay Fut kung fu.

Listening to him tell his story and watching him imitate the move he had made against Leoni, I was amazed, and realized that he was a consummate kung fu master. He was one of the last links to authentic chi kung and kung fu. At that moment, I promised myself that I would do my utmost to learn from him.

The next day Chen began to teach us the Tai Chi ruler. Derek had told me that I was going to learn something special, something few other people knew, and that even with my Shotokan background, I would be challenged by it. When the seminar began, Sifu Chen showed us the ruler, pulling it out of a small canvas bag. It was about ten and a half

inches long, curved, with two bulbous ends; it resembled one of the foot massage rollers popular during the seventies. Using it would convince me that slow deliberate motion, coupled with conscious breathing, could give you iron hard legs while keeping the kind of true strength the ancient martial arts masters had described in the classics.

The sequence began with five movements, warming up the body for the Tai Chi ruler movements to come. They were symmetrical and graceful. First you placed the ruler in front of you, then dipped down five times, bending low each time and scooping your hands in front of you. Your back had to remain straight, and you had to keep your eyes focused in front of you. The breath followed the movements of your body in true chi kung fashion, in on the yin movement, out on the yang. At the end of the movements, you picked up the ruler and placed it on a place on your belly called the first tan tien, a spot about three centimeters below the navel, the source of the body's true power, balance and health. Sifu instructed us to hold it there, the ruler held lightly over the prescribed spot.

There were a total of eight ruler movements, and each of them grew more complex and demanding. The first movement was to guide the ruler down the body, slowly tracing an arc from the midriff to a spot an inch below the knee and then back again. Sifu insisted that the movement be done slowly, eight times, on both sides of the body. After the first set of repetitions on the right, I began to feel a burn. By the time the second set on the left had been completed, I wanted to stand up. Both sets were repeated on the right and on the left side, then once more on the right and left. Next we were asked to take out our notebooks and write the sequence down. It was the closest thing to a break we got.

After writing down the movements, we went on to the second exercise, arcing down and up again, but this time raising our foot at the end of the movement so that we came up to a standing position. It was repeated right and left twice, then written down. We had to sit and think about what we had done, speaking to no one and trying to recall all of the movements. Then we would go on to the next movement, stepping out with the ruler and crossing the floor as we went. The sequence of teaching was repeated until we had done all eight of the Tai Chi ruler exercises. The total time for all eight sequences was forty minutes when done exactly correctly, twenty when done fast.

Chen's method of instruction was simple. He watched each of the moves with absolute attention, never missing a mistake, neither praising when something was done well, nor condemning when a mistake was made. When we sat back against the wall to write our notes, he told us not to. The spine was a conduit, he said, a kind of energy channel. We should keep it straight so that chi could flow down it in an unimpeded way. This was the single most important factor in promoting and maintaining health. Without chi, and a clear pathway for it to follow, there could be no health, just a kind of functioning, a maintenance of existence. This was the difference, he said between the Western and Eastern healing. In the West, we focused on health as the absence of illness, in the East, it is the presence of vitality.

After the last of the eight Tai Chi ruler exercises was over, Chen once again made us write it down, then gave us a handout containing descriptions of all the exercises. If he had done so at the beginning he said, we would have assumed we knew it, and not made an honest attempt to learn the movements. This way we were forced to recall things and

digest what he had taught us. By making us do the extra work of writing, we were more likely to internalize what we had learned. We each received a ruler to use in our practice and to keep if we ever went to future workshops.

My legs ached as I got to my feet, and I knew that I would experience some soreness. But for some reason, this work seemed more immediate and intense than hard style training. The slow movements had required great strength, different from the short-term bursts of endurance required in karate. Unlike those kinds of movements, the ruler had required that the postures be held for a long time, and this meant that you could not go from move to move, compensating for the discomfort of being in one position for a long time. While performing the movements, we were asked to remain in one position for a long time, and to work with the breathing and stance of that movement. There were no breaks.

As I packed my bag, I thought about what this meant. I knew that both kung fu and chi kung asked you to hold stances for long periods. This was the traditional training. In the ancient temples where kung fu had first been taught, it had been done this way. Strength and breathing had been coordinated, and the monks had undergone long hours of disciplined exercise, holding stances. Doing this made them strong enough so that the moves of kung fu could be performed correctly. When kung fu and karate became sports, much of this was removed. The time that stances were held was reduced so that modern students would not become bored or discouraged. Breathing was barely emphasized at all as sport-oriented forms become more and more popular. The original emphasis on Chinese medicine was taken out, and only a few of the chi kung forms survived

modernization as individual drills or special practices within one or another kung fu school. Even then they were not strongly emphasized. Students did not like to spend time just working with their breath and stances. I asked myself if it was possible that, as a result of all this, I had been practicing a form of counterfeit martial arts?

When I was younger, my karate had been directed towards competition. The fantastic athletic feats I had seen as a young man seemed to vindicate what I had done. The higher ranking black belts, with their blinding speed and fantastic kicks, had seemed like examples of authentic warriors. To me, anything that impressive needed no further explanation. It worked. It worked for people, and it worked in the street. It must work, because it seemed so great.

I asked myself an important question. Had I begun to realize that there was a more authentic type of martial art, a more complete form, better for people, and more effective as a martial art than Shotokan? As a karateka, my teachers had told me to keep training, that any truths I needed to realize would come to me over time. Philosophy was not mentioned. Somehow we were to absorb it through throwing front kicks. But we did not. Instead, many of us became physically and spiritually bankrupt. Clearly, something was wrong. Once again I asked myself what it could be.

As martial artists we had started off with the best of intentions, determined to practice something which would make us better people. Students wanted something that they could believe in. Instead they got something that asked them to go against all reason and that gave them a dangerous and misleading sense of personal power. It had happened to me as well. I had lived for karate and spent my time in the karate world. A martial art

should make you better as a person. In some notable cases it did. But for the most part, what I had seen over twenty years showed me that it did not.

I did not see this kind of error in Sifu Chen. At seventy two he looked and moved like a man decades younger. There was a vitality in his voice and movements and a twinkle in his eyes. He spoke openly of the Taoist way and its power and exemplified it in his open and friendly manner. It had shocked me at first, but now I could see the sense of it. Of what use was it to hide behind black-belt degrees if you were not the kind of person who warranted respect? That kind of charade could never last. So far Chen had not demanded any kind of false worship or misleading subservience. It made me think.

In the Hoitsugan, where many of these doubts had first begun to surface, we once joked about sensei worship, the blind inability to recognize that many of these men, so technically proficient in their arts, so deadly and powerful, were hopeless as human beings. For all his speed and power, Matsumoto sensei was cruel. Shina sensei was a drunk, as was Kurosaka; and Asai sensei, for all his time in China, had gone over the edge into his own world of fantasy and abuse. They had lived hard lives, and it had returned the favour in ill health and alcoholism. Of all of them, only Fukuda sensei and Kanazawa sensei had remained as examples of what karate could do to make human beings complete.

As I picked up my bag and joined the group going out with Sifu Chen for lunch, I admitted to myself that I was at the kind of crossroads we come to when we must commit to one way or another. If I chose to go with this group of people, I would be learning an entirely new way of life. It had to begin with a commitment, perhaps to learning everything again, in a way that I hoped would bring me a new authenticity and a

realization of what I had once believed in, and what I wanted to continue to develop: a deeper art and a better way of being.

I held the sports bag loosely in my hand, wondering which way to go. Left to follow Chen and the Tao Ahn Pai, or right down the street to the train station, and perhaps back to my old way of thinking or perhaps even out of the martial arts altogether? It seemed unbearably difficult to take the first step. The door was still open. Thomas had told me to close it on my way out. Now it seemed that it was open in another sense as well. For a moment I stood watching them, then stepped outside, shut the door, and called out for Sifu and the group to wait.

### *Opening the Temple Door*

The decision to follow Chen's way turned out to be more than just turning my back on the past. It meant a new commitment. Derek, Tony and I began to practice chi kung in cycles: six months with the Shen, six with the earth meditation, six with the ruler. It was a doorway into a different world, the world of Chinese martial wisdom. The search for authenticity was connected to what lay beyond it. I wanted the complete art: healing, martial arts, and spirituality. Fortunately, the correct teachers had come. I spent forty minutes each day doing one of the three types of chi kung Sifu had taught. The best time was in the morning after breakfast. The energy I gained made the practice well worth it. Sacrificing that early morning space meant that I would reap rewards throughout the day.

During the first month I did not notice much difference. In the first cycle, I cultivated the subtle energy of the Shen. It made sense that I would not feel much in the

beginning. It took time for the energy to develop. At the end of the first six-month cycle, I switched to the earth meditation, and noticed that my breath had deepened and that meditation was easier than it had before. I was more centred and looked forward to each session. When it came time to switch cycles to the Tai Chi ruler, a curious thing happened. I had decided to do a small session of earth meditation before each ruler practice. I noticed that when I started the meditation my hands warmed up. After the second month of the ruler / meditation cycle, I could summon the warmth by thinking about it. Surprised, I asked Derek what he thought of this. He laughed and gave me a copy of a book called *Song of Tai Chi Practice* saying that the answer would lie there if I was willing to look. I poured over it and after reading it for the third time, came across the line, “And it is the will which moves the Chi.” I understood this to mean that our thoughts summoned the chi, and excitedly, I began to double my practice. In addition to chi kung in the morning I began to practice the twenty- four move Tai Chi form in the evenings. Sometimes I would reverse the practice, but every day I practiced both Tai Chi and chi kung. Soon I felt the chi in all my extremities, not just my hands, and I no longer doubted that it was real.

*Becoming a Scholar Warrior: The Path of the Dragon Heart*

It takes a dragon’s heart to pursue self-realization. There is no easy way. When you enter the Wu Lin and pursue martial excellence, you commit yourself to becoming what Deng Ming Dao calls a “Scholar Warrior,” a unique combination of poet and fighter, warrior and healer, spiritual seeker and sage like individual who exemplifies the best of the

worlds of renunciation and commitment in one human being. Chuang Tzu wrote that the “superior man is behind and yet he is ahead,” meaning that though he may not seem to be a winner in the usual sense, the superior human being actually manages to gather more real success. To do this requires great courage. You must take chances and do things that, to those around you, seem totally senseless. It may seem to them that you have lost all perspective and are spending your time following unprofitable paths. But it is still worth pursuing.

By our fourth year in Japan, Jocelyn and I had stepped onto the Scholar Warrior’s path. She had started studying the martial arts from me several months earlier and was making progress. Compared to our friends in North America, we had very little: no home, no jobs in Canada, no permanent possessions or furniture, and no North American financial portfolio. But at the same time we had priceless treasures: Tai Chi Chuan, Hsing I, languages, and above all the precious treasure of Chi Kung had taken our lives to new levels. We had travelled the world, seen the sun set on Hong Kong, walked the streets of Bangkok, heard the cry of the mussein from mosques in Singapore, and walked the beaches of Australia. Through all of it the wisdom of our teachers had been guiding us. Each new experience took on a different perspective than it would have five years before.

Our health was changing. Jocelyn’s was improving. I felt stronger and healthier. We both did chi kung on a daily basis, and the effects of it were changing us. I had never felt more balanced or energetic, even in the years when I had been at the height of my form in karate. I could feel the difference in my martial arts practice and in my daily life.

Since the first seminar with Sifu Chen, I had seen him many times and had become one of his regular students, along with Derek, Thomas, and a small group of others we counted ourselves friends and pupils of a great master. He taught us more chi kung forms: seven stars, the five breaths, nei gung healing, and more; and he helped Jocelyn a great deal, giving her special exercises to do for some health problems. His perspective and the depth of his knowledge astounded her.

All of this had a significant effect on me, making me more aware of the links between healing and martial arts. I began to realize that there was more here than I had thought, and that I needed to go deeper. I had reached a point where, as a practitioner of the fighting arts, I felt superficial. I now needed to learn more about healing.

The best way to do this was to learn from those who already understood the healer's path. I needed to become an Oriental medical practitioner. In any endeavour there are different but complementary elements. This was the great wisdom taught by Lao Tzu. Darkness complements light, dryness complements moisture, the active stirs the passive, and death is the other side of life. It was time for me to look at the other side of the martial way.

In order to do this, I enrolled at the Edo Kai Institute of Oriental Medicine. Derek, my friend and Hsing I teacher, was the instructor. Making a decision to become his student meant that I had to surrender myself to his wisdom and teaching. The two of us spent many hours talking about what it would mean for our friendship. It is one thing to meet in a light-hearted way and share the brotherhood of martial arts practice. It is quite another to come, open and vulnerable, in a spirit of humility, to learn from him and accept

his criticism. I needed to know what lay beneath the surface of practice. To do this I would need to unlearn as well as learn, forgetting old concepts and opinions to make way for new ones.

### *A Sea of Words*

The following week I was back at Derek's, this time with a notebook and pen, serious about studying. I, and several other students, had decided to meet every Tuesday and Thursday. This would give us enough time to absorb the previous week's lessons and have time to study the new material that Derek assigned us. Occasionally he would be gone, and we would be expected to study and practice on our own. For the others this was fine, but it created problems for me. I was enjoying my medical studies, but the combination of learning Chinese medicine while continuing to study Japanese was too much. I was determined to succeed, but doing both at the same time brought to mind the ancient Japanese proverb: A hunter who chases two rabbits catches neither.

Each day ran into the next in a predictable pattern. After teaching classes, I would run home and study Japanese, then switch and try to absorb the material for the upcoming lessons at Edokai. Once there, Derek would give us huge amounts of information about acupuncture points and correspondences and the history of Chinese medicine, as well as the Chinese characters for each point and the relationship between those points and aspects of medical theory we had already talked about. The result was a sea of words, which I could not possibly absorb. Each time I got back on the train to go home, I would study Japanese. By the time I got home, I would be exhausted.

Sometimes Jocelyn would pour a bath for me, and I would slip gratefully into it. Afterwards I would study until midnight. The next day the cycle would repeat itself. I would take every spare moment to study on my breaks, at work or on the train. There was no other way to succeed at the goals I had set for myself. Since my boyhood training with my father, I had dreamed of becoming a certain kind of person. Although I could not always articulate it, I knew what it looked like. All of my life I had pursued this vision. It had finally become more specific in the image of the scholar warrior, and now that image was taking on more substance. Many times I fell asleep studying. Once I collapsed exhausted. I knew the Oriental medical points but could not understand the relationships between them and the meridians. I also had difficulty understanding the more complex relationships between each point and the five elements. The theory of the five elements was itself difficult and challenging.

The ancient Chinese had observed the world around them and had seen that each aspect of that world, and each object in it, had a relationship to something else. In order to represent those relationships in ways that could be more easily understood, they had constructed models. Yin and Yang, for example, was such a model. But they had created others as well, each of which fell in and out of favour over the centuries. The five elements model of the famous medical classic the *Su Wen* was an example. In this model, the universe was conceived as consisting of five elements: fire, water, earth, metal, and wood. Each element had a relationship to the others in a cycle of creation or destruction. Water overcame fire, earth created wood, metal defeated wood, and fire destroyed metal.

These relationships were codified into patterns based on the points and meridians of the human body. One element overcame another, yet another element supported it.

If a wood point was imbalanced, resulting in illness, a Chinese medical doctor would stimulate a point identified with earth. In doing so, he or she would be providing support for the wood point in much the same way that the earth nourishes a tree. If a fire point was causing an imbalance in a patient's health, then a water point would be used to quench it, so that the excess could be eliminated. In this way, balance could be achieved, the patient could be healed, and the natural homeostasis of the body was restored.

But memorizing the points was not enough. In order to become a true Oriental medical doctor you had to memorize the qualities of the points and their relationships. This was a complex task involving more than just cataloguing names. In addition to knowing their element relationships and the yin and yang correspondence for the points, there were other symbolic relationships used to explain disease and the influences that affect it. There were the five pernicious influences: heat, wind, dryness, moisture, and cold. Sometimes the points were thought of in terms of family relationships. One point was the mother of another, yet another was child to a corresponding yang father. And all of these relationships were thought of in terms of an endless flow of chi, jing, and shen. The three life-giving jewels flowed throughout the body in complex patterns of energy, an endless, ever-changing river, connected to the larger flow of universal chi expressed in the world of mountains, rivers, oceans, plains, deserts, earth, air, and water. In the eyes of the ancient Chinese, humans were microcosmic examples of the universe around them. The first step in becoming healers was to know ourselves.

To make sure that we understood that healing was an extension of our own natures and that we were facilitators of self-healing rather than healers of others, we practiced Chi Kung before each session. Most of the practices were from Sifu Chen's Tao Ahn Pai system. After our initial introduction to Chinese medicine we began to do the Shen exercises. This was followed by the gradual introduction of the six healing breaths and six-star chi kung. Long and slow, these breathing and chi manipulation exercises activated our internal energy for the healing work ahead of us. By doing them, we were able to make a bridge between the practice of chi kung and the acupuncture we would be learning. The two were not separate, and this was one of the first lessons we had to learn. In Oriental medicine there are no separations between the disciplines.

Another benefit of doing chi kung before acupuncture was the activation of energy that could be passed from us to our patients. This kind of healing was known as nei gung. Although none of us was a master of this, we could still learn to pass on healing energy to those around us and to pass it on to the people we treated. Of the four of us, Derek and I were the only ones who had received this teaching from Sifu Chen, but in the tradition of the ancient healers, we passed it on to others and practiced it at the end of chi kung sessions and during our lessons.

Each time I went to the Edokai Institute, I experienced the kung fu family relationship. Each session was extremely enjoyable, and I relished going as though it were a homecoming. Once stepping over the threshold of Derek's home, I would put my shoes to one side and enter a new world. In that world, everything was different. Derek, my kung fu brother and teacher, would come to the door and greet me. I would greet my

fellow brothers, who were learning the way of the Tao. The room would be redolent of books, with stacked shelves of volumes on healing and the martial arts. Calligraphy adorned the walls, and pictures of Derek's teachers were everywhere.

Entering this world was like passing through a portal. It was not just a visit to a friend. It was a voyage to a distant land. The smells and sights of that land represented the world of old China. For me it was also the world of my childhood, of my father's home, full of books on Zen and Asian mysticism. All the elements were there, so that when I came for my lessons, I experienced a deep peace the other students did not know. The seed of my experiences had been planted long ago on the battlefields of Normandy and in the dojos of Ebisu. My knowledge of Eastern wisdom was a result of long talks with a father not afraid to think differently. His scars were my inheritance, and his pain was mine, but they also represented a passport to a place I might never have known had he not been there.

## Chapter 4: The Book of the Wanderer

As I practiced with Derek and learned oriental medicine from him, I realized that I was forming a link with the Chinese martial arts and also with Chinese culture. I knew that I wanted to go to China and study martial arts there. I also knew that I wanted to study from Derek's teacher Chow Kai Lung. A trip to China would create a connection with the world of Chinese martial arts in the same way that my first trip to Japan had linked me to the world of budo. But there are rules about how you approach a traditional kung fu master. It has been that way for centuries and continues to this day. Through Derek I had the opportunity to study with Master Chow in Canton China. The more I thought about it the more I realized that it had been coming for a very long time. Slowly and relentlessly, over many years, I had been changing from the hard warrior karateka to the softer, healing-oriented, Chinese stylist. Now I was about to make another shift into a new world .

But I could not show up at Master Chow Kai Lung's doorstep and demand instruction. This was different from the mass teaching of modern martial arts. Studying with a teacher like Chow Kai Lung was a deep, personal experience with strong obligations and clear rules of conduct and behaviour. Once accepted by him, you became a son or daughter, and he became your father. This was much more than the commercial-school relationship of North American martial arts studios; the two experiences were worlds apart.

Centuries ago, a student wishing to receive instruction from a martial arts master would bring the teacher a bag of gold coins and wait outside his home. The teacher would accept the gift, but was under no obligation to accept the student. A year or more might go by in which the teacher would test the student in various ways. If he was found worthy, he would be taken in, but if he was not, he would be rejected out of hand, and there was nothing the student could do about it. Although this was the end of the twentieth century, not medieval China, the situation was the same for me. I would have to go through a period of petitioning before I could be accepted by Master Chow. I discussed it with Jocelyn. She thought that I should try, and wanted to come with me. To hear her say that she would like to train in traditional kung fu in China was gratifying.

I called Derek and asked if Sifu Chow might teach us. He said that he thought he would, but that it would involve a lot of letter writing and time. He then asked me if I knew who Chow Kai Lung really was. I had to admit that I didn't, and because I really wanted to know this man who might one day be my teacher, I asked Derek to tell me about him.

Chow Kai Lung belonged to an ancient kung fu family. His father had been a renowned master of the powerful Hung Gar system of kung fu. From earliest childhood, he had trained in the traditional Hung Gar way that had been handed down from father to son for generations. The lineage was connected to the famous master Wong Fei Hung. Chow Kai Lung was a strict traditionalist. He did not even recognize the popular sport form of kung fu, known as "Wu Shu." To him there was only one correct and legitimate

kung fu, and that was the traditional kind.

From the age of five his father made him hold the famous horse stance for long periods of time. This time-honoured method of developing strength, power, and mental perseverance became so natural to him that he could soon hold the stance for over forty five minutes without flinching. When his father was sure that he was strong enough, he began to teach him the deep and powerful moves of the style to which he had dedicated his life. Chow Kai Lung loved it and trained hard in the long and complex Hung Gar sets.

By his early teens he knew the system inside and out, and his father, knowing that the boy needed more, introduced him to the keeper of the Choy Lay Fut flame. This renowned master was the direct lineage keeper of the Choy Lay Fut style, a type of kung fu that sprang from the teachings of three masters who, centuries before, had blended their styles. Using long-range, higher stance techniques, it was the perfect complement to the deep low stances of Hung Gar. Because he had already mastered one style, the second came easier to Chow. Choy Lay Fut was renowned for its complexity and the number of forms it employed, but Chow Kai Lung mastered them all, so impressing the keeper of the flame that he began to train him in secret to the exclusion of his own son.

When Chow Kai Lung was twenty three years old, the master took him to one side and told him that there was nothing more he could teach him. Chow was shocked, thinking himself just another student, but the master told him that he was serious. He would always help and work with him, but Chow had become a young master in his own right, and anything he could add would be superfluous. Embracing Chow he told him to

travel the length and breadth of China, seeking martial knowledge wherever he could find it. Chow took him at his word and began to travel in search of teachers. He went from master to master asking for instruction, sometimes being accepted and sometimes having to wait. He practiced as much as he could, learning more and more, until he had absorbed the techniques of a total of sixteen different kung fu schools. When he returned to Guangdong in the south, he knew more than his teachers; and he was still young.

He had searched for the knowledge his Choy Lay Fut master had told him of, and had been rewarded for his patience. In some cases, he was the last person to learn a form before the teacher who taught it to him perished. Once he learned a rare form known as “Tamo Hands” from a Shaolin monk who perished a month after he had passed the form on. Many others had also passed away, but their knowledge was passed on to him. He became a living repository of traditional kung fu. And then just as Chow Kai Lung began to mature as a kung fu master China was torn apart.

*China, 1967: Guandong Province*

*A World Gone Mad*

They are everywhere. No one is safe from them. No thought or feeling, once uttered, can stand the terrible power of their authority. There is nowhere to run. They know no kindness and have no mercy and detest all the things Chow loves. They are the Red Guard. Mao has released them and given them almost unlimited powers to pillage and destroy, to wipe clean the face of China and create something new in its place. He is using

them to outwit and outmaneuver his political opponents. But they do not know this, and their passion, believing that they are the instruments of his will, is terrible.

Like everyone else, Chow is caught in the middle. Every day he puts on his blue Mao jacket and picks up the small red book of quotations, carrying it with him in case he needs to brandish it and prove his allegiance to the regime. In his heart, he repeats the Buddhist blessing his teachers have taught him—*Namu Amida Guan Sher Pao*. It is a chant which means Blessings to the Bodhisatva of Compassion. On the outside he shouts slogans and meaningless cant. As he works at the manual labour the state has assigned him, he mentally reviews the complex and beautiful kung fu forms he has learned. The forms live on in his heart and memory, where the graceful moves withstand the madness of daily life. And it truly is a world gone mad.

While the state shrieks about new and greater production triumphs and bumper crops, the peasants starve to death, and people disappear. Chow keeps his head low, but the fierce passion for the ancient Chinese martial arts burns brightly within him. At night, in greatest secrecy, he practices his forms, hands and feet blurring at high speed as he performs the complex, flowing, and beautiful moves. The temple courtyard where he once practiced as a boy is now a detention centre. The park where he and his friends gathered to spar is paved over. Many of them are dead, taken away with their families, executed or detained, but Chow Kai Lung remains.

Each day, as he makes his way home on the beaten old bicycle that is his only transportation, he reviews his lessons and keeps alive the wisdom of his teachers. He is determined to lose nothing, to carry the past into the future, for himself and for the future

generations of Chinese. It makes him strong and keeps him going. It is a time of great solitude. On his own he must preserve the knowledge he has so painstakingly gathered and keep it alive, training in solitude and keeping the transmission vibrant and real, without the aid of any outside inspiration.

In the small studio on the bottom floor of his home, he practices as people have for centuries. Chow alternates his time between practicing hard style kung fu and the softer forms he has learned in his travels. His training schedule, although secretive, is well structured, and he repeats all that he has learned so that it will not be lost. It is an immense amount of material. Ordinary people have dedicated their lives to just one system. But Chow is no ordinary man. He is to the martial arts what Mozart was to music. A kind of special genius burns in him, and it allows him not just to maintain what he knows, but to leap beyond it and create new drills and training methods, all of it in secrecy and under the constant pressure of discovery and death. The tension of it is terrible, and Chow soon needs a release from the loneliness and stress.

It comes in the form of a man named Yu Fei Ha. Yu is a wanderer from Northern China, and one spring day in 1968, he appears in the old city of Canton, long beard and moustache in the style of an ancient Chinese sage, defying all that the cultural revolution has taught, and going directly to one of the old haunts of the Wu Lin, well known before the Communist revolution. In the old days, martial artists would gather there to talk, exchange information, and seek or deliver challenges. Miraculously, it has survived as a tea shop, and one day Chow, in a nostalgic moment, decides to go there. On that fateful day, Yu makes the same decision, and they are together in the shop when Yu looks around and

their eyes meet. It is Yu's eyes that rivet and fascinate Chow. Bright and compelling, they are unusually round and large, like the eyes of a tiger. Chow instantly recognizes a fellow master, and the two stand up and walk toward the centre of the room, where they wordlessly take a table and order tea. Chow buys, and in the formal language of the martial world asks if Yu has a home, and if so, who has laid its foundation—code for the name of his martial art style and its lineage. Yu replies that his home is that of the five elements and intercepting fist and that its foundation was laid by Li Xun Yi. In a single phrase he has identified himself as a Hsing I stylist and told Chow Kai Lung his lineage. Chow Kai Lung responds with a similar phrase, saying that his home is that of the red family, using the old pronunciation of “Hung” for red, and that he who laid the foundation was Wong Fei Hung. Expecting to see Yu react to the famous name of his kung fu ancestor, he is surprised to find that Yu simply nods.

The two men leave, and as if intuitively understanding each other, bicycle to the outskirts of the city where Ba Yu mountain, a tall, mist-laden crag of trails and remote clearings, offers shelter from prying eyes. There the formal invitation to “play” is given by Chow, the younger, to Yu, the grey-bearded senior, and “hands are crossed.” What follows is a titanic struggle. For the first ten minutes, no strike, kick, punch, or move of any kind is issued. Neither master, younger or older, sees an opening, and the duel is played out in the place where the strongest and sharpest of weapons exists: their minds. Finally, Chow strikes with the famous Hung Gar “tiger hand,” using all his internal power in the blow. It is deflected by Yu, who, in the way of all Hsing I stylists, defends and attacks simultaneously. Chow is able to spin out of the way of Yu's returning fist, feeling

the energy of it bombard him, and then launches a powerful series of attacks aimed at Yu's head and torso. To his amazement, the old man does not step back, but absorbs the energy of each attack and adds it to the power of his counters. Chow Kai Lung feels each counter-attack grow in strength. But his own power, subtlety, and strength are also great, and Yu cannot find an opening in Chow's defences. There, amid the tall, waving bamboos, the two men duel, each struggling to outwit the other.

The duel continues beyond the half hour mark, punctuated by brief interludes in which the two step back and try to find an opening. With each exchange, respect grows. Neither man wastes energy, and so neither becomes exhausted or depleted. Finally, Chow Kai Lung attacks again, lashing out at his opponent with a little too much power, so that he ends up ever so slightly off balance. At the level they are at it is a fatal error. Yu does not miss the opportunity and, slipping his foot inside the younger man's guard, sweeps him to the ground. Chow drops to his knees and strikes his head against the ground in the ancient manner, signifying that he would be honoured to be Yu's student. But the older man will have none of it, insisting that Chow Kai Lung is being foolish and that he would not disgrace him by taking him on as an inferior.

It is the beginning of a strong and profitable friendship. The two men are constant companions; Chow absorbs the Northern style of Hsing I, and Yu assimilates the esoteric chi kung that Chow has learned in his travels. It is often impossible for them to meet. Raising the suspicion of the Red Guard would be disastrous. Chow's neighbors pretend not to notice while the two men train in his basement. They agree to give a warning sign when the fanatics begin their parades through the nearby streets. During the next few

years, Chow Kai Lung learns Hsing I until he becomes as great a master at it as he is at Hung Gar. Eventually, it becomes his favourite martial art, replacing both Hung Gar and Choy Lay Fut. He starts with the five elements and continues on to the twelve animal forms, but Yu's teaching does not end there. Eventually he gives Chow all he knows, even the most esoteric forms of martial chi kung and the breathing drills designed to summon powerful kung fu fighting techniques. Yu is in his eighties, and knows that time is short. The students he trained in the north are now all dead or dispersed, victims of the madness that caused him to journey south. Chow is the closest thing to a disciple he has, and so, in violation of ancient kung fu tradition, he gives him everything, passing on his last teachings as the cultural revolution ends in the middle 1970s, and then joins his teachers.

Chow does not know it, but he has received a unique treasure. He has been given the full curriculum of an original lineage of Hsing I Chuan: all the forms, all the sparring sequences, all the weapons, all the chi kung and all the medicine: everything. While the last months of fanaticism play themselves out, he has received a true jewel, something to crown the amazing collection of martial wisdom he has already inherited. With it he will teach a new generation of Chinese the ancient ways, and carry on the legacy of men like Li Xun Yi and Sun Lu Tang and, of course, the last of his teachers: Yu Fei Ha. What he does not know, as life begins to return to normal, and the Mao jackets and red books are put away, is that other people will be coming to him, men and women from lands and places he could not have imagined when he began practicing the horse stance at his father's side.

*An Old Woman Abbess*

While sanity returns to China, Chow Kai Lung realizes that he needs to find something that will more directly benefit others. He is already doing and teaching the kung fu he knows, and this is a kind of service. But he feels that he wants to do more. He enrolls in courses at a local hospital and begins his formal education in Oriental medicine. It turns out to be a good decision. His teachers are unfailingly kind and considerate, and Chow Kai Lung is one of their favourite students. As a martial artist he understands the need for gentleness and the power of kindness and patience. As a Buddhist he values compassion, and this fits well with the healing arts. Each patient offers an opportunity for spiritual practice, and learning each part of the Chinese medical system is like unfolding the petals of a lotus blossom. You go deeper into the beauty each time, and the more you commit yourself the more you receive in return.

Chow decides to specialize in herbology, taking the extensive pharmacopoeia of the old medical system as his area of expertise. He is strictly traditional. If it does not conform to the ancient philosophical and medical standards, he is not interested. This causes some clashes with the hospital administration, but also gains him the admiration of many of his teachers. Many of them see him as an upholder of the ancient ways, and his practicums go well because of this. He is very good at acupuncture, but it is in herbology where he is most talented.

At night he continues to teach kung fu. Though he has only a few students, he is well known in Canton as the man of the ancient ways. Many in the martial arts community call him “shi,” the old Confucian term for a knight, or “Dai Shi,” meaning

“great warrior.” It is a term of unqualified praise reserved for few people. He has earned the title through his uncompromising loyalty to traditional kung fu. As times modernize and many martial artists turn to the cinema or replace traditional teaching with flashier forms of Wu Shu, Chow Kai Lung continues to teach as his father and his teachers taught him.

Although there is much to be grateful for, he is also a little disappointed. He had hoped for more from those who had studied from him and for more from his marriage and daughter. Yu Fei and the others are long dead. There could be no solace from them, and for the first time Chow Kai Lung begins to wonder about his faith. He has always been a Buddhist like so many of those around him. The Cultural Revolution had been unable to take his beliefs from him, but something is missing. Following the rituals his father and others taught him is suddenly not enough. He needs something to transform the lighting of incense and mumbling of sutras into a vibrant faith. Something or someone.

Chow is aware that it is important for him to cross this threshold, and so he finds a Buddhist temple and begins to practice there. Once inside he steps into another world. It is the world of the Dharma, the law of the Buddha and his teachings. Another world, but also a way to make you more connected to your daily life and all it entails: a way to become a richer, deeper human being, more connected and more committed. Chow steps into the temple knowing this and making a choice to formalize his commitment to spirituality. He has always been a lover of tradition, grounding himself in orthodoxy. He loves the past because it connects him to what his culture has to offer.

On the outside, the temple doesn't seem like much. Like the buildings around it, it is functional and dull. Made of crudely mortared red brick, it even lists a little to one side. Inside it is a place of great faith. The walls are covered in sutras proclaiming Buddhist truths. The sutras are adorned with calligraphy and encased in ornate frames. There are large statues of the Buddha and the protective bodhisatvas. The smell of incense floats up from the interior, letting those in the street know that within the precincts of the temple there is worship and devotion.

Chow walks into the main floor area, where Buddhist literature is distributed, and sees a frail old woman, in the robes of an abbess, reading a tract. For a moment their eyes meet, and in that way that is wordless but says much, she and he communicate the depths of their convictions and compassion. Her eyes are bright and intense beyond her years, and she stands up and walks toward him. Taking his hands in hers, she presses a small amulet of Guan Yin, the female bodhisatva of compassion, into his waiting palm. Her name is Ming Na, and as she turns and walks into the interior of the temple, Chow Kai Lung follows her. He would follow her for the rest of his life.

### *Searching for a Master*

Years later, Chow Kai Lung's predictions, that China would open up, come true. his country and his life change, and, in the early 1990s, he begins to teach foreign students. Tony Roberts and Derek Morris are the first to be accepted. A few others follow them. Although Chow embraces this opportunity, he decides not to lower his standards or corrupt his art because change is occurring. Kung fu is still kung fu, and

teaching it authentically means that you have to honour it and preserve the standards that have always existed. Centuries before, monks gave their entire lives to perfect and preserve one style of this ancient art. This sacrifice cannot be dishonoured. It has to be given meaning through teaching the art properly.

At the same time, Chow realizes that he is teaching modern people and that, as China continues to open and change, foreigners will be among them. They will not learn in the same way as Chinese have, and they will not succeed in using the same methods he has used with his Chinese students. Chow realizes this, and for a while puzzles over what to do. He must learn how to teach kung fu and the ancient arts in new ways so that they will retain the wisdom and character-building aspects that have made them valuable and, at the same time, keep pace with the rhythms of modern life. Even the old masters, like Wong Fei Hong, changed the kung fu of their time and invented new forms and training methods. They kept pace with the times, had even been revolutionaries, adding and subtracting elements of the old arts, while retaining essential aspects of the traditional ways.

But acknowledging this is easier than deciding what to do. Chow Kai Lung is a strict traditionalist, and creating his own forms is not something that he feels comfortable doing. And there is more. The need for modification and change, something made clear by Ming Na's teachings, and the beauty of tradition war within him. As the number of students, both Chinese and foreign, begins to increase, the problem becomes more acute.

Chow solves it by forging a compromise. He will teach kung fu and tai chi according to the old ways, but he will do it in a different order and at a different pace.

When he was young, a student learned only one style of kung fu and devoted himself to that style to the exclusion of all else. A weapon or chi kung practice from another style was not taught. It was looked upon as an admission that perhaps the other school might be superior. To practice another style was a kind of treason. Chow Kai Lung had had to learn other styles by seeking out different teachers and by secretly travelling to different parts of China.

In the end, Chow decides that he will teach many styles at the same time, choosing one that he thinks will benefit each student best. He also decides that once he gets to know a student, he will pick a style that suits that student and teach it as a specialty. This means that he will be teaching each student a different curriculum, an unheard-of practice in the traditional Chinese martial arts community. Chow Kai Lung knows that this is not only wise but also appropriate. It will expose more people to kung fu than the older teachers had been able to in the past. He will need time to adjust to this new approach, but in the end both he and his students will benefit in ways the old style of teaching could not provide.

It takes great courage for him to do this. He agonizes over whether or not it is the right decision, and wonders what his teachers would have thought of him if they had known. Would they have approved and given him their acceptance, feigning indifference while turning a blind eye to what he did, or have been enraged at the way in which he breaks the order of teaching? He does not know, but once he makes the decision, he resolves to stick to it and begins to teach in the way he feels is best.

He begins by making kung fu more enjoyable for children. He invents new drills and games that accelerate learning and cut down on the amount of time spent in stance training. He is careful that the quality of the kung fu does not suffer, and that the new techniques continue to develop the stamina and abilities that the old stance drills provided. One has to replace the benefits of the other. If he departs too much from the old ways, the value of his teaching will be lost, and it will become a watered-down form of gymnastics. Chow wants to preserve the best of the old, and unite it with the attitudes and beliefs of the modern world.

He makes kung fu a dynamic and enjoyable activity for all his students. Instead of having boys and girls practice endless drills, he sets up a stool and places phone books on top of it. He then makes it a game to see who can kick highest and clear the largest number of books. Whoever is the most flexible and strongest will clear the largest number and win a prize, perhaps a hot sweet dumpling or a pastry. He uses the forms to create competitions in which children imitate animals. "Can you move like a snake?" he asks. "How about a tiger?" "Who can be the best crane?" and so on. Soon the classes fly by, and the children are on their way home, chattering about how much fun kung fu is. They tell their friends, and soon the word about the gifted kung fu teacher's classes spreads throughout southern Canton. Chow is besieged with students. The groups grow larger, and he is "Uncle Chow" to more and more neighborhood children.

For weeks he takes walks in the woods of Bai Yu mountain, contemplating his next course of action. He visits the temple daily to discuss it with Ming Na. It is a hard

decision. He could make a living as a full-time kung fu teacher, and although he probably would not make much money, he would be doing the thing he loves most.

If he became successful, he would probably have to teach larger numbers of students, hire instructors, and become involved in the politics of the martial arts world. This possibility does not appeal to him. He does not like teaching groups of more than six or seven students, knowing that this makes individual instruction impossible. He only takes on larger groups so that he can instruct the children in his neighborhood, and although the number of students he teaches is increasing, he keeps the groups small. If they become too large, he knows that intimate family-style teaching will be impossible. He will not be able to teach like the famous kung fu masters of the past who moulded their students into great people while carrying on with a normal business or job. In the end, although the internal debate continues, he knows what he will decide. He will teach only small groups of Chinese and foreigners.

#### *A Carefully Worded Letter*

In the summer of 1993, I asked Derek to write a formal letter of introduction to Master Chow, requesting that I be able to train with him and become his student. I asked him to do the same for Jocelyn, although she had no formal martial arts training. He was glad to do so. When he had finished he brought the completed letter to our apartment in Kawasaki. We were both very excited. He read it to us one night in June in the sweltering heat of a Tokyo summer. It introduced us as two friends of his, people of good character, who wanted to study kung fu. He told master Chow that we were serious about studying

and asked him if we could come to visit him. Would he then consider us as possible students?

The drafting of the letter was an important act. It was an invitation hanging in the balance. Chow Kai Lung had no obligation whatsoever to accept. He did not know us, and although Derek had studied hard and done well, there was no guarantee that Chow would extend his admiration and respect to us and allow us access to his vast knowledge. The first hurdle to overcome was successfully meeting him. If the meeting was favourable, then it might lead to a deeper relationship. But if feelings were not right, nothing could be established, and Chow Kai Lung would be justified in refusing us. He had refused others. There had to be some proof that we were people of good character and that we would respect both him and the teachings. A rapport had to be established. It was not enough that we were respectable. We also had to be reachable, emotionally developed, and not stunted or cold. If all of these conditions were met, then perhaps Chow Kai Lung would consider us.

We did not know what to expect. Derek had spoken of Sifu Chow many times, as had Tony Roberts. They had told us elements of his life, had spoken of his great abilities as a teacher and martial artist, and had explained how he was one of the famous “street teachers” of China, a master, little known, but supremely talented. Other than that, we knew little about him. I had never even seen a picture of him and did not know his personality. Chow had to be accepted by us as well. We had to be careful about him too.

Something in me, an indefinable feeling, told me that there was no need for concern, but all the same, we were cautious. As a martial artist, I had to be careful. My

career was entering a critical phase. Although you never truly leave your roots, and my roots would always be connected to karate, you can make mistakes, leaving one phase of your life to enter another. All of the Tai Chi, Chi Kung, and Hsing I I had done so far had been an introduction to two things. One was the way of softness, and the other was the way of healing. I was entering the world of Chinese martial arts. I did not wish to make a mistake at a critical juncture. Although I felt youthful at thirty eight I was getting older. The days of being banged around a dojo, of hitting and being hit, and of giving as good as I got were fading. Like many martial artists my age, I had to fight smarter and conserve my power and energy.

This was natural, as natural as the passing of the seasons, but it had to be addressed in considering any future training. I could not afford for Chow to injure me in order to prove some point about the superiority of the Chinese martial arts, or just because he needed to beat his students to show that he could still perform the feats of his youth. There *were* such teachers, and their devastating cruelty and egotistical attitudes had injured and psychologically scarred many people.

There was also the matter of my wife. The martial arts were new to her. She would undoubtedly find some difficulty adjusting to both the culture of the arts and the way in which martial artists moved. Everything would be unfamiliar to her. There would be no point of reference, as there was for me. She could ill afford a cruel or unpredictable teacher, even less so than I, since she was at a very impressionable stage of her martial arts career. As always, much depended on the teacher.

If the sifu was good, then Jocelyn would have a long and rewarding career, which would help her tremendously and teach her about herself. If he was bad, then not only would she quickly grow to despise the martial arts and those associated with them, but she could also be both physically and psychologically damaged. There was a lot at stake. No amount of reassurance from Derek could solve this dilemma. The only way to solve it was to go to China and meet Chow Kai Lung.

*In the Gateway of the Wu Lin*

The letter had been sent, received, and, surprisingly, within the space of a few weeks, we heard that Sifu Chow wanted to meet us. We would be entering the Wu Lin. The Wu Lin is the martial world. It is the collected teachings, events and energy of all authentic martial artists everywhere. “Wu” literally means war, or war art, and “Lin” means a world. It is a universal understanding and a definable kind of energy, though it is not an organization like those of sport karate. It was a special connection with China and kung fu, since it is out of China that all the great far eastern martial arts came. We were undertaking the first step, but we were happy that we had at least passed that first hurdle. It was one of the most difficult. We also knew that first impressions were important. Although we were reasonably confident that all would go well, we wanted to make sure that we had a purpose in going to China other than just visiting master Chow. If it was our only motivation, then we might go all the way to China only to be turned down. We decided to unite two things we had always wanted to do and work on them together.

We had always wanted to study Chinese, so about a month before we were due to meet Sifu Chow, we enrolled at Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute. We had heard about it from Derek. The one-month introductory course in Mandarin they offered was perfect. It consisted of basic written and spoken Chinese. We could live in a dormitory on campus and go into the city to sightsee and visit master Chow. Our plan was to use the experience as an introduction to China and, if all went well, to ask Chow Kai Lung to teach us some of what he knew. Perhaps, if he liked us, we might be able to convince him to start training us regularly.

Of the two of us, I knew best what this meant. To be able to study the original Hung Gar style would be a great opportunity and privilege, and, if Derek's descriptions were correct, we might be privy to much more. On previous visits, he and Greg had been trained in many forms of chi gung. The possibility of training in these arts was exciting. The martial arts still excited me in the same way as they always had, my enthusiasm burning undiminished, as brightly as ever.

Now I would share this love of the martial way with my wife, and we would step into a new world together. I would learn more about myself, and take the first steps on a new pathway, as would she. But no two paths reach a destination in exactly the same way. Practicing kung fu would not be the same as training in karate. It was not just the techniques. The cultural assumptions, traditions, rituals, and the entire way of being would be different. The most important thing to realize was that the spiritual underpinnings of the arts were different. Years before, when learning from master Chen, I had realized an essential difference between Buddhism and Taoism. It had occurred while

I was at a workshop on the earth meditation. I was sitting in the half-lotus posture, my hands in a meditation position, when Sifu's wife Juanita had said, in front of everyone, "Perry, you have to learn to relax!" My body immediately dropped into a softer pose, and I realized that the spiritual perspectives of Zen Buddhism did not fit Taoism. I had been trying to apply my previous training in a new situation, but the two were worlds apart. It was a mistake to equate one with the other.

Traditionally the Chinese people have great patience. They absorb, change, and wait. Invaded many times, they have in turn absorbed their invaders. Epoch after epoch they have waited, enduring famine, rebellion, war, and pestilence until they have prevailed. Although Chinese culture has been changed, modified and, on occasion, almost annihilated, it has always survived. Over the long term they act like water, wearing down difficulties and opponents, flowing around and over obstacles, and conquering by waiting and yielding. As a people, they are like Tai Chi. First they yield, then they overcome. I was going from one cultural perspective to another, from one set of beliefs to another and now, at last, from one place to another. Physically, culturally, and psychologically, I was going to China.

### *The Gate of the Middle Kingdom*

Dust blew across the square as I stepped up the gangplank and stepped on to Chinese soil. It was hot and humid, the unbearably sticky weather made worse by a storm coming over the mountains. Bits of paper and garbage blew across the broken-tiled entrance to customs. My first impression was of filth, of piles of grime and garbage

everywhere. China was a dirty place, the yellow soil clinging to everything, blowing into your clothing and creeping into the creases of your face, gathering like a fine film on the outside of your teeth, slowly insinuating itself into your possessions and life.

We had woken up early that day, and boarded the hovercraft taking people up the Pearl River to Canton. It had been a long and interesting ride, spanning centuries in hours. One moment we would look out the window and see an abandoned factory or settlement, the next we would look into the distance and see a farmer or fisherman poling a flat-bottomed boat as he might have thousands of years before. Everywhere you could see the steep mountains of China, hemmed in by the broad expanse of muddy river, the barrier of nature channeled humanity into a watery highway for peasant, nobleman, artisan, and emperor for millennia. It was easy to look at it and assume that nothing had ever changed, that this was somehow the China of the Han or Sung dynasty.

We found our bags and shuffled forward with the rest of the passengers toward the reception area. Pushed and jostled, we took out our passports, picked up our bags, advanced a few feet, then sat on them as the people ahead of us were processed and interviewed. Sometimes someone would be waved through without being checked. The next person would be held up, questioned, and have all of his or her baggage taken apart for no apparent reason. People milled about the reception area in a confused mass, going over to entry areas whenever they felt like it. No one directed them, or insisted that they go anywhere in particular. Through the confusion a sort of line formed; and Jocelyn and I, conditioned by the orderliness of Japan, followed it to what seemed like an area for new

arrivals. Our passports were stamped and our luggage was passed through without being hand checked.

After this, we were ushered into a courtyard, where a few People's Liberation Army troops were sitting around and smoking. No one seemed concerned that we get safely to where we wanted to go. People gawked at us with an intensity that we had not seen anywhere else. Foreigners were still a novelty. We received a lot of stares, so many that Jocelyn started to feel uncomfortable. They were direct, prolonged, head-to-toe examinations. She was understandably put off by them.

The smell of tobacco was everywhere. It seemed as though everyone in China, smoked, as though the custom had never faded as it had in the West. But somehow it seemed appropriate, part of the fabric of Asian life. That was its attraction. The more tidy and manicured Asia became, the less Asian it seemed.

A half hour later, we walked over to the last taxi waiting by the curb, and asked the driver if he could take us to Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute. A Chinese friend had written down the name on a piece of paper, and we gave it to him, hoping to see him smile and ask us into his cab. He looked at it, put it down on the seat of the cab, and lit a cigarette. When it was going, and he had taken a long leisurely drag, blowing the blue smoke out into the interior of the cab, he raised his hand with five fingers extended. We thought it meant five hundred yuan. Accustomed to Japan, where there is no haggling, we wrote down the symbol for five hundred yuan and showed it to him. He shook his head violently, cursed, and wrote down five thousand yuan, then plastered it against the window of the cab.

There was little we could do. We needed a ride. There were no other cabs in sight, and we had gotten off the last ferry of the day. Knowing that the fare was probably much too high did not help us get to our destination. We nodded, told him that we would pay, and pointed to the back of the cab. Without a word he got out, opened the trunk, and stood to one side while we put our bags inside. He looked away as we lifted the large suitcases and pretended not to notice that we were struggling. We were dirty and hot, and as we opened the passenger's doors and sat on the badly cushioned seats, we were angry but grateful that at least we had managed to get a ride.

We said nothing as we rode to the university. The alienness of everything struck me immediately. I felt an undercurrent of fear, an apprehensiveness, the powerful sense of dislocation you experience when everything familiar has been taken away. There is elation and excitement, but also a sense of strangeness. You are of another place, of other beliefs, and you bear a mark of being outside an outsider. You are "other," not of "us." No amount of preparation can remove this, and it is something that never goes away. You cannot read yourself into preparation for this other place of alienness, and you cannot conceptualize your way out of the fear and loneliness it brings. It is more powerful than that.

Suddenly I was lost, and I felt strange looking out of the cab's windows. Through them I saw my first glimpses of Chinese life. As the cab bounced through the broken streets, I saw the dilapidated homes of Guangzhou. Some of them were very old, but still being lived in. Washing hung from rusted iron balconies. Scarred and broken pots, painted a rusty brown, held simple plants and vegetables, grown to supplement the meager food

of the tenants. Many of the doorways were covered by red, white, and blue plastic sheets. Everywhere there was dirt.

As the cab made its way out of Canton, following the rough roads to the university, I became even more strongly aware of the filth and poverty. The buildings I saw were ramshackle affairs. The bricks were small and poorly made, and the mortar was little more than sand thickened with mud and water. A new highway was being constructed, which made the already dusty roads even dirtier. We could see the superstructure going up as we bounced along on the pothole-strewn roads. China was modernizing, but most of the work was still being done by hand. This was very Asian and very Chinese. Hand labour was still the method by which most things were done. Modernization had not yet taken hold.

When we arrived at the university, surrounded by a wall and a gate, the cab driver grunted and pointed to the trunk. We did not know whether or not it would be safe to leave the cab. We were afraid that he might drive off with our suitcases. We had heard of such things happening, and had been warned in Japan that Chinese cabbies were not to be trusted; because of this, we stayed inside, and waited for him to get out. Exasperated, he cursed and then climbed out of the driver's seat, stepped around to the back of the car, took our bags out of the trunk, and dumped them in the middle of the road. We paid him the money we had agreed upon at customs, and watched him return to the city, no doubt cursing foreigners all the way.

Our contact person at the university was a man named Wong Li . We didn't know much about him, only that he would help us meet the appropriate officials and become

acclimatized to life at the university. Derek had mentioned that Wong Li was very helpful and that he could speak English well. We had expected things to look like a Western or Japanese college, with tiered buildings, modern libraries, and computerized facilities. In our mind's eye, all universities looked and felt that way, and if this were a university, then it should be like the institutions we were familiar with. Our culture had prepared us for a certain kind of place, an image inspired by the wealth of the West, but we did not know this about ourselves, and even after years of living in Japan and acclimatizing to a different culture, we were still conditioned by our past.

Arriving at the Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute changed all that. As we struggled to haul our bags into the main entrance, we got our first opportunity to look around. The buildings were old. Crude numbers had been stenciled onto the walls. The walls, which were made of plaster, were yellow and crumbling. It looked like an abandoned military base. Dirt roads separated the buildings, and they were strewn with bits of garbage and abandoned tools.

Any respect we may have had for the Institute as a place of higher learning disappeared immediately. We were meeting the gulf between the wealthy and poor nations, and feeling the effects of that difference. As citizens of a wealthy nation, we judged what we saw and found it lacking. How could anything so decrepit be worthwhile? Such judgments were an intrinsic part of us. We made an automatic assumption that if it was good, it must also look new and familiar.

But we were not looking at the degree to which Japan was a modern nation. Although part of Asia, it was the most European of Asian nations. Modern and

sophisticated, life in Tokyo approximated the West. Although it was difficult for a Westerner to penetrate the mind of a Japanese, life on a physical level was not that different. Going shopping in Ginza was like strolling down the streets of an upscale American neighborhood. Businessmen hurried along in well-tailored suits, and office women wore beautiful outfits as they rode modern trains equipped with the latest technological innovations. Public announcements chimed out the news and weather warnings, and, if anything, Japan was technologically ahead of the West. It was easy to adjust to all of that, to feel comfortable with the amenities you associated with modern life. But China was a different place. In Guangzhou, we were seeing the most progressive, modern, and luxurious part of China, and we were shocked.

There was a large gray concrete building several hundred yards away. We picked up our bags and dragged them toward it. In the intense heat of a Guangzhou summer it was hard work, and we had to stop several times. About half way to our destination, Wong Li met us and introduced himself. He helped us with our baggage, and took us to our room in the married quarters where we put down our bags and then followed him to another building across the street that housed the administration offices.

We met both the director of the foreign language program and the president of the institute there. They were both in their late fifties. There were no signs of high status or privilege, and they appeared to be very simple people. Dressed plainly, they looked for all the world like the leaders of a road-side work crew. Wong Li introduced us to the foreign language director first. She was intensely shy and spoke from a prepared script, welcoming us to the institute and telling us that she hoped our stay would be a pleasant

one. She explained the history of the institute and its goals, and told us she was happy to see us, and that her dream for the future was that many foreign students would come to the school to learn Chinese. She looked down or away several times and rarely met our eyes. The difference between her and the more self-assured Japanese we had met was shocking. The college president did not speak to us.

That was all. In what had obviously been a prepared meeting, we were formally introduced to the institute and its administrators. Wong Li spoke to them for a while in animated Chinese, punctuated by soft laughter, then we said good-bye, and returned to our room. Wong Li helped us find our way. His English was remarkably good. For someone who had not spent much time outside China, he spoke confidently and well. We did not have to slow down our speech or repeat anything we said.

Back in our room, Wong Li explained that classes would begin the next day and, at that time, we would meet our teachers and receive our texts. He took us for a walk around the campus and showed us the restaurants and bookstore and each of the buildings that housed our classrooms, making sure that we understood our schedule and could read the fundamental characters corresponding to the time and place of our class. Then he told us the names of our teachers. He explained that everything would be taken care of and that we should just try and enjoy ourselves. This was a great experience, he said, and China was changing. He asked us to look at everything clearly, forming our impressions each day from our hearts and senses, and to depend on them to give us a true impression of what China was really like.

The he said good-bye after showing us a thermos of hot water placed outside our door. Each student received a thermos, and it was filled with hot water in the morning and replaced each day. We were to buy the tea, if we chose to drink it, from the on-campus store. Any other supplies we wanted, such as paper, pencils, or notepads, would be there. He asked us what our interests were, and when I told him that I liked the martial arts and had studied Kung fu, Tai Chi, and Chi Kung in Japan, he nodded and smiled. Jocelyn told him that she would like to study Chinese brush painting. He said that he would look into classes for her. After this, he excused himself, saying he would see us again the next day.

#### *Toads and Mosquito Netting*

There was an established structure to the institute. Each room had two beds, and each bed had mosquito netting attached to the fluorescent light above it. During the day the maintenance staff tied the netting to the lights, and at night you let them down in a kind of conical shape over your bed, making sure to keep the flap of the door closed. Each corner of the bed had to be tucked in tightly, with the mosquito netting secured under each corner. In the morning, when you woke up, the outside of the netting was black with mosquitoes. If you moved too much in the night, the door would jar open, and they would stream inside, covering you in unbearable bites. There was no solution to this problem. You just had to be careful, make sure that the netting was tucked in tightly and that you slept very carefully.

After the first week and a half, we became accustomed to the worn, dirty appearance of our surroundings, and our focus changed. We were less shocked and more able to look beneath the surface appearance of things. An amusing example of this was our room toad. After the first few days, we discovered that we were not alone in our room. There was a toad living in the toilet area. At first we were shocked, wondering if anything else lived there, and, if so, how big and potentially dangerous it might be. We both promised each other that if a rat decided to move in, we were automatically going to move out. It could have the room and the mosquito netting. But nothing larger took residence, just the toad, and we learned to live with it. After the second week, it was part of our lives and formed part of an important lesson we would have to learn in order to live in China. Although we in the West are steeped in wealth, in the process of achieving a very high standard of living, we have lost a kind of simplicity and isolated ourselves within our comfortable surroundings. People in other parts of the world, such as China, do not have such wealth and are forced to live poorly, but at the same time are blessed with a simplicity that keeps their lives grounded. Of course they do not know it. If given the wealth of the West, they would gladly accept it and probably undergo the same process we have, making their lives more twisted, complex, and unhappy. But they do not have that choice. When four Chinese meet over a battered plastic thermos, it is often all they have. Simplicity takes on great meaning. When you have nothing but each other, you have a lot. It is difficult to understand such paradox, but a potent reality when you experience it.

At the institute, we experienced it every day. The rooms were worn and scratched, the paint peeling away. Desks were worn benches, and the accompanying chairs were fold-out plastic wrecks, but the atmosphere was rich and full of meaning. In a place where overhead projectors were unknown, chalk and a blackboard had to suffice. Yet learning was everywhere. I saw this in a small area outside the building where we took our grammar classes. At night I would see students wandering aimlessly, or sitting on the concrete benches, but with a radio pressed against their ear. For the first few days I couldn't figure out what they were doing, and then realized that they were listening to Radio Free America. Not complex and not fancy, but effective. They were determined, and hungry to learn. Once one of them approached a group of us and began speaking English, asking us detailed questions with near faultless pronunciation. When a fellow foreign student named Dal asked him where he had studied his English, he replied that he had never left China and had learned by listening to the radio at night and starting up conversations with people he met. We were astonished.

By the third week, I had difficulty remembering my initial impressions when we had first arrived in a battered taxi almost a month before. By this time our living conditions seemed normal. They even started to take on a kind of beauty. I had never really understood the Japanese concepts of *wabi* and *sabi*, which roughly translated as rusticity and simplicity. Now, as I confronted them every day, they began to make sense. In some peculiar way the red plastic cup that went with the thermos was more beautiful because it was pitted, dirty, and worn. This sense is more easily felt than explained, but it is true. The outside walls of the buildings were beautiful because they were stained,

yellow, and cracked. Repairing, painting, and plastering them would have produced another kind of beauty, but not the same kind. When you are in China, you learn to appreciate the first kind of beauty.

*We Meet Sifu Chow Kai Lung*

Before we left Japan, we had been given the telephone number of a contact person who would tell Chow Kai Lung that we were coming. Her name was Chao Min Gwan, but her English nickname was “May.” She was one of sifu Chow’s kung fu students. When we arrived in China, he was showing her the most advanced weapons forms the Choy Lay Fut kung fu system had to offer. This involved long, hard hours of training. It was difficult to master the long and convoluted forms, and Sifu Chow was not easy on her. She found herself practicing for hours at a time to perfect even the smallest moves.

When we first called, she had just finished a long and exhausting session on the Choy Lay Fut spear. She was affable, but tired, and sensing her fatigue, we arranged to meet her at a hotel in the middle of Guangzhou the following afternoon. She explained that it would be better if we joined her there, then followed her to Sifu Chow’s home. Once out of the university environment, we became aware that the institute was a separate world from the city. The city was teeming with life. We took another taxi, this one much better than the last, and made our way to the Dong Fang hotel. The Dong Fang was an international hotel in the middle of a sea of poverty. Broken, cracked, and dusty streets surrounded the pristine lobby. When the main doors opened, we could easily have been in

Toronto, London, or New York. Elevator music greeted us as we walked through the lobby and took a seat in the main restaurant.

We ordered coffee and a Western-style breakfast and waited, watching the main doors for a sign of May. The familiarity of the surroundings was like a salve. Somehow the food of your country is a medicine. Your body knows it, and knows that it will be good for you, so you associate peace of mind with coffee, scrambled eggs, and toast. More than that, the cleanliness of the hotel spoke of safety and familiarity. The irony of the situation was not lost on us. Outside, the Chinese people lived amid dirt, dust, and squalor, while in the hotel, Westerners ate bacon and eggs and listened to the “Girl from Ipanema.” The Chinese had created a beautiful illusion. For the benefit of foreigners, they had constructed hotels where visitors could go and be convinced that China was on the move, ascending to modern status and the good life. It seemed only a matter of time. Visitors could go there, be refreshed, and then go out and contend with the reality of Chinese life.

May arrived at noon. It was not hard to pick her out. Perhaps it was just the way she walked, upright, conscious, and poised, that told us she was a martial artist. It was hard to say. As she recognized us she gave us a broad smile. We had finished our breakfast before she arrived and were ready to leave immediately. We paid the bill at the front desk, and after talking briefly in the lobby, followed her out into the streets. May knew the quickest way to get to Sifu’s home, in the old part of Guangzhou. We had to negotiate the long tortuous series of alleys and back streets, following her as she turned

down one street, then ducked down alleys and back roads. Without her we would have been lost.

In the old city of Guangzhou you are confronted with a puzzle. In the maze of old brick buildings, there is no obvious right way to turn. The old section is hemmed in like a special quarter in a medieval city. Many of the buildings are several decades old, two or three stories high, with brick arches and windows that look down from balconies onto the street below. On each block there is an alley marked with Arabic or Chinese numerals. They are like dark passages in the interior of an unexplored ancient city, and there are whole neighbourhoods inside these warrens, made up of a small streets, apartment blocks, tiny markets, homes, and residences. Inside the facade of a 1930s-era building, people live as they always have, together in small neighbourhoods, linked one with another down the street, thousands of people and hundreds of families connected by the common thread of living: visiting markets and restaurants, meeting, eating, drinking, celebrating, prospering, suffering, and dying.

Life in those quarters is raw. If things are left out in the sun they rot, and after they rot they smell. Labourers become dirty, their skin tans like leather, and they are changed by the elements; aged and cracked by the sun, they bear the marks of the life they have lived. There are no air-conditioned malls, no smart buildings and UV-resistant moisturizers for the delicate skin of people who do not wish to age. Everything is as it always has been: raw, hard, and real. But there is a beauty in this imperfection. Because everyday items are scarred and broken, they exhibit an attractive patina. It would not be right to clean up the streets of the old town of Guangzhou. Somehow, to replace it with

something more modern would make it less Chinese and less significant. As May leads us through the narrow alleys of the old town, we know that it is unsanitary, stained, and broken, yet we find it beautiful. May loves it, loves this area she grew up in, where she first met Sifu and studied kung fu. She wants to go to Seattle and study computer science, but at the same time, she does not want to leave the only home she has ever known. As she walks, she calls out to people around her, friends who have known her since childhood. The area is one big neighbourhood. Here people have little in a material sense, but more in other ways. Their lives are connected, and the rich, unsterilized odour that offends us is part of the raw nature of their lives. These people are crammed together and know and love each other because, for them, the isolation and sterility that so often comes with wealth is impossible.

After twenty minutes, we come to a small alleyway off one of the main streets. It looks like every other passage and side street around it. I remember a bakery I have seen a block behind us and note it as a landmark, a guide to remembering Sifu's home. Several streets and alleyways later we find ourselves standing in front of a nondescript, battered green gate at the front of an old two-story building. Behind it is a rough and torn curtain, and behind that, a dark alleyway. May bangs on the gate with her fist and calls out loudly in Cantonese. For a moment there is no answer, then we hear a male voice bark a loud reply, and there is the sound of footsteps walking down the passageway. Seconds later, a fifty-year-old man with a broad face and wide impish grin bursts out of the gateway. It is our first sight of Sifu. He is broad-shouldered, stocky, and thickly muscled, though small by Western standards. A crop of unruly, wire-thick, straight hair sticks out above his

large, well-formed head. His complexion is ruddy and dark, and his deep-set eyes are bright and expressive, taking in everything at a glance. His smile is broad, uninhibited, and expressive. It shows the affection and self-assurance of a person who has little to fear or hide. He emanates energy, as though he has somehow captured life's primordial essence. A childlike enthusiasm bubbles out of him. Infectious and powerful, I feel it and like him at once. Somehow I already know that it is safe to learn martial arts from him; there will be no malicious cruelty from this man, and there will be no pointless harmful lessons.

A moment later, he invites us inside. Together with May, we walk down the tunnel-like alley, which turns out to be the entry to his home. On either side are other residences. Sifu's is in the middle of the complex. The only way out is through the alley and into the street beyond. He leads us through, and we are in his home. The training hall is first, and, as we step into it, we also step through time. He points to the back wall and laughs loudly, saying, "Sifu de kwoon." May translates, telling us that it means "Sifu's kung fu school."

It has been a kung fu school for one or another teacher for over a century. Derek had told me this, and I had looked forward for a long time to seeing it, knowing that famous kung fu masters of the past had studied and taught there. The walls spoke of history. In the Wu Lin, a training hall is a sacred place. It bears the sweat, tears, joys, and frustrations of the masters and students who have passed through it. Often a kwoon will have an elaborate shrine at the front of the room, sometimes occupying the entire wall, carved elaborately and bearing pictures or photos of Sifus gone by. It is at once a place of training, and a holy sanctuary. If there is no shrine, then usually calligraphy scrolls

bearing inscriptions with the maxims of the school are displayed instead; there is always an acknowledgment of those who came before.

In the past the techniques of a school were jealously guarded. It was worth your life to trespass on the territory of another kwoon. Unlike the easygoing camaraderie of modern sport-style martial arts, the traditional arts were intimately bound up in codes of honour. The lethal street techniques were jealously guarded. Challenge matches were fought to the death. If you wanted to prove the superiority of your art, you fought a student from another school. There were no referees to stop a match. In such an atmosphere, a trivial approach to training was a sure way to guarantee your death. There were no second chances or polite handshakes. Although the days of such matches were long gone, some of the spirit of those times survived in Sifu Chow Kai Lung's kwoon. It was a genuine training hall. Although he was always affable and kind, his approach to training was serious.

Weapons hung on the walls, some in their scabbards, and others, such as staffs and poles, neatly stacked in corners of the room. Scrolls adorned areas that were not covered by maxims, but there were also bare walls, peeling and old. The kwoon was a single room. There were no adjoining chambers, and Chow Kai Lung lived above the training hall. His home was part of the facility. We were shown upstairs to the living quarters, which were floored in stone and contained a large Buddhist shrine and traditional Chinese furniture. The room was a mixture of traditional and modern. A colour television set was on one side of the room, and a large traditional sideboard was on the other.

Chow Kai Lung was surprisingly open and approachable. Casually dressed in a sweatshirt and loose track pants, he was constantly smiling and laughing. May would translate for us, and he would answer in rapid, easygoing Cantonese. From time to time May would explain what he was saying, but he always kept eye contact, watching our reactions so that he could learn what kind of people we were. He took out old photographs of his teachers and kung fu ancestors, tracing the lineage of his art back over the decades until the photos became old and faded then became paintings, as we reached back before the beginning of the twentieth century.

I understood what he was doing. He was presenting his credentials, so that we could see that his kung fu was authentic and acceptable. I recognized some of his teachers as pivotal figures in kung fu history. The names astonished me. But more than that I was impressed by Sifu himself. He was a bundle of love, energy, and enthusiasm. If we asked a question about a certain style of kung fu, he would instantly leap to his feet and demonstrate it in the middle of his living room, arms and legs moving blindingly, solid stances and flawless transitions showing the results of a lifetime of training. Then he would sit down and laugh modestly, speak briefly with May, and she would translate what he had said. If we spoke of another martial art, he would be on his feet again, showing us the moves of a rare Tai Chi form or some type of kung fu I had never seen before.

I recognized him for what he was: a consummate master. There are great kung fu teachers capable of astonishing skill at one or another form of the art, but there are few, if any, who can demonstrate mastery of several styles. Sifu Chow Kai Lung was such a

man. As the afternoon wore on, I asked him questions about numerous kung fu styles. Again and again he demonstrated not only well known forms of kung fu, such as White Crane and Hop Gar, but also styles I had not heard of. My heart beat quickly when I watched him perform. Jocelyn stared in amazement, riveted to her chair. She was full of the beginner's wonder at the martial arts. But even after decades of training, I too was amazed. I knew I had found my teacher.

But he had not yet accepted me. For a terrible moment, after seeing him perform, I was afraid that for one or another reason, he would refuse to train us. It didn't seem possible, since so far we had been getting along well, and he was open and affable, but I could not be certain. Traditional kung fu was different from modern karate. No explanation was necessary for a teacher refusing a student, and the refusal might be based on something as ephemeral as a feeling he might have about you. There did not need to be a logical or justifiable reason in his decision.

If he did refuse, then a doorway would close, and if it did, and I wanted to study kung fu, I would have to return to Canada and seek out a sifu there. There would be no guarantee that whatever teacher I found would have a fraction of the skill and power I saw in Chow Kai Lung, or even a tenth of his spiritual and healing insight. He was an uncommon man, a rare jewel. In the world of the Wu Lin there were few like him. I knew that if this opportunity passed, it probably would not come again, and I prayed that things would work out. I knew that if I pressed too hard, he would reject us outright, and our opportunity to study would be gone. At the same time, if I appeared too distant or cold, he might assume that I wasn't really interested and reject us on that basis.

It was a difficult situation. But, as in so many similar situations, the solution lay in sincerity. If I presented myself as a person I thought he might like, there would be a stiffness and an insincerity that he would instantly recognize. If I did not communicate my love for the martial arts and my appreciation for his teachings, that too would come across, but this time as a kind of coldness. I decided that the best thing to do was to be myself and try to convey my love of the martial arts. Jocelyn would have no problem. Her delight for what she saw stemmed from the natural wonder of a beginner whose mind is full of possibilities.

The traditional way is different than the modern way. When you study with a Sifu you become part of that kung fu family. It is like entering a clan, like being adopted. In the kung fu family you have older brothers and sisters whom you are obliged to respect and learn from. You also have younger brothers and sisters whom you are expected to take care of. It is a more personal relationship than in a modern commercial school. There are titles in Chinese for the other members of the kwoon. The analogy extends to all the members of your "family." You have aunts and uncles, and you revere your Sifu's wife or husband as though he or she were your foster parent. It is much more than just showing up, working out, and going home. You are expected to take care of your Sifu if he or she becomes sick or falls on financial hard times, just as you would with your own mother or father.

This is far removed from the modern martial arts. I had been reasonably close to John McDonald in my youth and had gotten along with my Japanese instructors, but these experiences did not prepare me for the kind of relationship I was expected to have

with Sifu Chow Kai Lung. I was accustomed to the modern Japanese way, and because of this I had difficulty with the idea that I was expected to relate to my teacher as though he were a father figure. It appealed to me, but it was strange. The context of my training up to that point had been that of the samurai. Now I was being asked to join a martial clan and accept instruction from what seemed like a likeable teddy bear of a man. It was a new and confusing world.

That first night we went to dinner at a restaurant in the centre of the old district. Sifu seemed to know everyone. The restaurant was large, well-aired, and full of patrons. Everyone was interested in us. Even in Guangzhou, foreigners were rare, and everywhere we went we were the subject of stares. None of it seemed to affect Sifu, who carried on long and affectionate conversations with everyone. The restaurant owner was his Hsing I brother. They had trained together as boys. Everyone liked Sifu's spontaneous humour and likeable personality. On that first night, as we drank and talked and different people dared me to eat this or that exotic dish, I began to relax and allowed myself to think that this might be a more enjoyable way to learn the martial arts.

I had been aware for some time that I needed to move on and discover a new way of practicing that involved more than the hard invulnerability of youth. At dinner I knew that if Sifu accepted us as students, I might be able to break through to a new path. Watching him eat and joke with those around him, I felt that it might actually be possible. For a few moments we were able to talk, he in broken English and I in rudimentary Chinese. It was a good sign that something was being forged between us. I had been worried about not being able to communicate with him, concerned that long pauses and an

insurmountable coldness might set in, but none of that occurred. May helped me when things slowed down, and the atmosphere of the restaurant was relaxed. Sifu liked Jocelyn very much, and this was a good sign. Her quiet nature and self-effacing ways instantly gained his respect, and this, in turn, helped me to establish a stronger foundation with him as a teacher.

After we had finished eating, Sifu, May, Jocelyn and I took a taxi back to our dormitory room at the Institute. I knew that we had been accepted as students, and May confirmed it when she told us that Sifu liked us and wanted to teach us kung fu. I was overjoyed, and told her to tell Sifu that we felt honoured. When we arrived at our room, we talked and drank tea. After we had exhausted all of the small talk, Sifu told us that it was time to show us a glimpse of his kung fu and that we should try to remember it and practice it at home. He showed us a portion of the famous Hung Gar tiger and crane form. Even in his street clothes, he emanated power, and the intricate powerful moves of the form were very impressive.

He told us that the next time we came to see him, he would teach us authentic kung fu and that our relationship would begin. Until then we were to continue studying Chinese and keep alive our love of Chinese culture and the martial arts. It was good, he said, that we were interested in these things. They would help us to understand our kung fu in a deeper way. We said good-bye to him with a lot of good-natured handshaking and many promises to see each other soon. We thanked May for translating and told her to keep in touch. Our language course would be ending in a few days, and we knew we

would be returning to Japan after that. We had received approval from our kung fu teacher, a wonderful thing, but it turned out that we would not see Sifu again for another seven months, when our spring break gave us time to return and train in earnest.

*March 1994: In The Hung Mong Dong: the Medical Martial Lodge*

There are many ways to reach the goal of being a great martial artist. One way is to train in basics repeatedly. This is the way of karate, but as I was to discover soon, the kung fu way is different. Both paths carry you to your goal. But the different approaches reflect the difference in the arts. For most of my martial arts career I had trained as a karateka. For me training was synonymous with the hard approach I had used all my life. Although I had practiced Hsing I with Derek, and Tai Chi with others, I did not understand fully the difference between karate and kung fu.

We were now back in the kwoon preparing for our first serious training session. Now that I had been accepted as a member of Sifu's kung fu family, I would have to learn what the difference between karate and kung fu was. During this first stay at his kwoon, Sifu gave us an example. He twisted his hand upward in front of us imitating the blossoming of a flower. Then he said in broken English, "Slow, like flower." He meant that progress in the martial arts was like a flower blooming, gradual, and sometimes barely perceptible. A student was not to be rushed, and should not expect instant progress. We cannot see a flower bloom, and we would not see ourselves instantly transformed into kung fu masters. More important than this lesson in patience was the compassion that came through in Sifu's kind smile and the slow movement of his hand. It symbolized the

attitude of a proper kung fu teacher: that each student is different, that we all learn at our own pace, and that it is not necessary for us to gain everything in a moment. We can learn gradually and slowly and, while we learn, practice patience.

We began our training by learning a chi kung form. It was designed to cultivate our internal energy and help us perform our kung fu more dynamically. Sifu had already decided that we would start by studying Hung Gar. I had asked him if we could study Tai Chi, but he had declined, saying that it was important that we first establish a firm foundation, and that this meant that we needed to study a style of kung fu that would emphasize the basics. Hung Gar was good for this. With its emphasis on solid stances and straightforward moves, it would teach us the basics, and we could go on from there to learn more complex arts. The Hung Gar chi kung set was perfect for this. It emphasized breathing, but used the martial moves of Hung Gar. By learning it we could acquire the movements of the art and at the same time benefit from the breathing exercises.

*The Base of the Temple: Training in the Classical Way*

Our training always began with a morning shower. Sifu did not have hot water or the luxury of a Western-style shower. Instead we would use a plastic bucket in his small cubicle of a bathroom and clean ourselves, then pour water over our heads to rinse ourselves off. After showering, we would have a breakfast of rice gruel and steamed dumplings, followed by tea, and the lesson would begin. The training was not like other martial arts training I had experienced. In contrast to the tough, war-like instruction of my Japanese instructors, Sifu taught us gradually and kindly. We would learn one technique

after another until we knew them thoroughly, and then add them together until they formed a whole. We never hurried, and though he was strict, he did not strike us, shout, or tell us that we needed to try harder. We were never berated, and we were told on the first day that if we became tired, we ought to raise our hands and tell him. It was okay with him if we needed to take a rest. We had only to ask.

It should have been easy, but it was difficult for me to adjust to this. I had been pushed to the limits of endurance, cursed, struck, and yelled at before, told to find my spirit and try harder, and even abused on more than a few occasions, but I had never been treated by a martial arts teacher with such grandfatherly kindness. It didn't seem like real martial arts training at all. On the first day, after completing some basics and going over the Hung Gar chi kung form, we were told to stop. It was time for tea. Tea!!! What the hell was this? How could this be martial arts, and how could I respect it? How could this be good martial arts instruction? Even Toyama sensei was more martial than this, and I had considered that training to be soft in comparison to the hombu dojo and the Hoitsugan.

Training with Sifu didn't resemble normal martial arts training at all. He was so sympathetic and kind that he seemed more like a friend than an instructor. If I had been more perceptive, I would have realized that his teaching was extremely valuable. After all of the years of training in Canada, Japan, and now in China, I could not yet breathe properly and had trouble relaxing. In the Hung Gar chi kung form, Sifu was giving us a way to co-ordinate our movement with our breath. Breath led to chi, and chi led to internal power, linking up with the martial arts moves so that one day we would have

awesome power and perfect internal and external balance. My karate senseis had never spoken of this. The internal elements were left to conjecture or simply ignored.

Yet now they were here, vital to my progress as a human being and a martial artist. I needed to go in a new direction, not just in my martial arts, but also in my life. I wanted more for myself than speed and muscular power. Instead of decaying, I wanted to increase in strength, stamina, and vigour. No one can stop aging, but I wanted to maintain a youthful and dynamic appearance at an advanced age. Ironically, one way to do this was to accept my age. Doing so would allow me to train properly for who and what I had become. In my youth, the period Taoists referred to as the spring of life, it had been natural for me to hit and to hit hard. Now, in the summer, I would need a different kind of training and a different way of looking at life. Entering this period would mean that I would have to do everything I had done before in a more intelligent and productive manner. Instead of uselessly expending energy, I would have to learn to conserve it and transmute it into something I could use more efficiently. I would have to examine what true martial power was, what the martial arts were, and who I was, and this would have to be done honestly. Important questions would have to be asked.

Was I truly proficient in the martial arts? Because I had received my black belt did not automatically mean that I was good at the martial arts. Anyone can put time in, going to seminars and training until they have many black belts draped around their waist. That kind of achievement meant very little, and I knew it. To be truly successful you need to understand both the internal and external significance of the martial way or you understand nothing. Collecting honours and certificates means very little. It shows only

the external aspect of training. To understand a martial art to the core and to know how it affects you as a person are the most important things.

I had to go beyond technique into a deeper kind of learning. Most martial artists never reach this stage. Caught up in the external appearance of punches, kicks, locks, and takedowns, these martial artists miss the point that they should be training to become better people. Sifu had learned this in the hard years of the Cultural Revolution and at the side of Ming Na. Now, at the age of fifty, he had become a fully developed kung fu master. Before that age, such an achievement is not possible. The proper time for mastership is in the summer and autumn periods of life.

Did I really understand the martial arts? I could not say for certain that I did. I had inklings, but to say that I was advanced in the way that Sifu was advanced, would have been a lie. There was still far too much to learn and far too long a path to travel to say that I was anywhere close to him. Now, in my late thirties, I had to be honest and do the hard work necessary in order to approach the higher levels. In the world of the martial arts, there is no room for delusion. You must face yourself and build from where you are. I had a respectable level of skill, to claim anything less would not have honoured the time and effort I had put in or the teachers who had so kindly given of themselves to teach me. There was no point in indulging in a kind of false modesty. But I still had a long way to go. Sifu could help me, and I needed to accept his teachings in order to make progress. The days of raw physical power were drawing to a close.

Did I understand myself? The answer lay in the process of searching and, I hoped, would reveal itself with time. When the question did not need to be asked, it

would be answered. Aging forced certain questions. Ming Na had once told Sifu that death had an undeniably quality that cut through all forms of delusion. Death was final. Aging had a similar reality, the first inkling of death's harsh banquet. I was getting older. In the martial arts, although age is venerated, it diminishes performance. No matter how much you train, age will loosen your grip on your sword. Eventually it will fall from your grasp, and you will pass from this life, as you came into it, from nothingness to nothingness.

I asked myself if I had become a better person through the martial arts. How much progress had I really made? I had been defeated by others, and had in turn defeated them. I had trained my body to a high level. But had I really progressed? Was I kinder, wiser, more resourceful, and a better person, or was I the same as I had been twenty years before with a few more martial arts added on? It would prove little if I could only say that I had added Tai Chi and Hsing I to the list of martial arts in which I had trained.

Each day after Hung Gar chi kung and tea, we would practice basic moves from one of two styles of kung fu. During the first couple of days we practiced hand techniques from the Hop Gar White Crane style. Sifu selected it because of its swinging arm moves and rapid stance changes. He said that it would help to open up our bodies and develop our chi. Following the Hop Gar, we would learn the basics of Hung Gar kung fu. While he taught us a lot, he never burdened us with more than we could handle. He would teach two or three of the first twelve Hop Gar movements each day. We would repeat them the next day, and then we would learn a few more. In this way he was able to give us a firm foundation for the art and ensure our progress.

By the end of the first two weeks Sifu felt that we were ready to learn a genuine kung fu form. This was a big step for us. The Hung Gar forms are long and complex. He finally chose the Tiger and Crane form, a classical set from the Canton school of Hung Gar. He said it was perfect for us, because it contained all the fundamental movements of the style and two different but complementary fighting styles. I was glad he had chosen it. I had heard of it, and knew that it was considered the heart of the Hung Gar system. He couldn't have chosen a better example. After he told us that we were going to learn it he gave us Chinese names. Jocelyn was "Hung ha" the crane, and I was "Hung fu" the tiger. They were our kung fu family names and important because our brothers and sisters would call us by them.

From the beginning we began to learn about life in Sifu's neighbourhood and about ourselves. Because traditional kung fu is so demanding, we were given time in the afternoon to take a short nap. After that we were given free time to wander around Canton and explore. We learned a great deal by watching. What struck us most was the material simplicity. People owned much less than in Japan or the West, but they knew more about their neighbours and the lives of those around them. Next door to Sifu there lived a family with whom he was friendly. They had a four-year-old son named Yok Hoi. He would squeal with delight when he saw us, then run to the door of their home, yelling "Hello." He would greet us each morning. After the first week he would sneak over and watch us train. Sifu would sometimes stop training, suddenly look over at Yok Hoi, and ask him to show us some kung fu. Each time he would make us laugh. Sometimes he would kick the wall next to him. At other times he would hold his breath and flail his arms

or jump up, imitating our moves. It was always something different and always hilarious. Yok Hoi taught us the beauty of childhood and the importance of learning to accept others. He never found us frightening or strange, and returned our delight with unconditional happiness and affection.

An unspoken warmth permeated life at Sifu's. The people we met were our teachers, from the shopkeeper around the corner to Sifu's friends and relatives. Each time we went walking, we learned new lessons. One of the most important was not to misjudge those who live in poverty. Had we compared the neighbourhood with the suburban neighbourhoods of North America, we would have found it lacking. Feature for feature it was shabby and poor, but what it had to offer, was rich. We had to learn to look beyond the appearance of the buildings and fixtures and find their true value.

Sometimes this would show itself in unusual ways. One lesson we learned concerned our dependencies. Sifu had hired a lady, whom we referred to as "Auntie" to cook for us. We lived and trained in Sifu's home, but he had to go to work at the local hospital. He did not have time to cook and care for us. We needed someone to prepare breakfast for us before he left in the mornings. Auntie would come in and make the rice gruel and dumplings. We would eat, train with Sifu, then rest or train on our own, and later he would return and train us more. Auntie would prepare lunch and we would nap, then get up for the late afternoon and evening lessons. A nice rhythm of training, eating and resting developed, but none of it could have taken place without Auntie. She was essential to our progress, an invaluable part of our training. The food she prepared was delicious and well balanced. She used natural ingredients and never overcooked or over-

garnished the food she made. She never used sugar. We ate large amounts of her food and washed it down with tea. It kept us going through what was becoming a gradually more rigorous training schedule.

After a week we began to notice something strange. No matter how much we ate, we never seemed satisfied, and we began to crave sweets. Headaches followed, and we started to experience mild nausea. It was harder to train, and we needed to sit or lie down more often. It wasn't until we talked about it that we realized what was happening. We needed sugar. Our North American and Japanese diets always contained sugar, and we weren't getting it in the food we were eating. We solved the problem by going to a bakeshop and buying pastries, but the realization that we were sugar-dependent was shocking. It was not just that a little sugar would have been nice. It was more that we needed it badly, and that was disturbing. We began to wonder about whether or not we were living healthy lives. We had certainly thought that we were, but our dependency on sugar told us that we probably were not.

There was obviously more to learn. What did health really mean, and what was good health when we could consider ourselves healthy, but discovered that we were dependent on refined sugar? What else were we dependent on? What else did we not know about ourselves and our health? Were we ill but unaware of it? Did we need to do something that we might think was unnecessary but was actually vital? We had long discussions about it when Sifu was gone. Certainly, we were learning something about the way we lived, but the question was, what was it, and what would be its impact on our lives in the future, here, or in Canada? Having learned the valuable lessons Sifu was

teaching us, could we really ignore them and return to the lifestyle we had left behind? Once you have learned something like this, how can you go back? Our lives had changed, and the change was not something bound by culture or our situation. It was part of the curriculum of life. On one occasion, when we had finished the Hung Gar chi kung set, Sifu gestured for us to sit down and have tea. He told us that the true meaning of kung fu was compassion and fellowship and that martial technique had little to do with being a kung fu practitioner, that to be “better” at kung fu did not necessarily mean being technically skilled at the art. We nodded, and he knew that we had heard what he had said but doubted whether or not we really understood it. It was a paradox, and one I had struggled with for most of my life: the outwardly violent produces that which is inwardly peaceful.

### *Climbing a Mountain*

At the end of our first week at Sifu’s, training began to get much harder. We had learned the Hung Gar chi kung set and had some acquaintance with basic breathing and balance. Now Sifu began to assign us the hard work of creating solid basics. He began with jong. The character for jong in Chinese means “post,” and the implication is of a post sunk into the ground, one buried so deeply that it cannot be moved. Sifu told us that every school of kung fu had one jong and that jong revealed the meaning and character of the style. Jong were postures, stances, firmly rooted to the ground, which helped train the practitioner in the basics of the style. If you did not master jong, your breathing, stances, and movement would never be solid, and you could not possibly gain proficiency in kung fu.

I had practiced the martial arts with some training in jong, but not to this degree. One reason was that until meeting Sifu, I had practiced sport martial arts. Now I began training in the authentic, classical way. I felt that my previous training had been superficial, and that if I wanted to learn real martial arts, I would have to start all over again.

This did not bother me as much as I thought it would. I had seen authentic classical martial arts for the first time. Now I was eager to learn. If that meant tearing apart everything I had learned before, then so be it. I would seek this knowledge whenever and wherever I could. I promised myself that I would accept Sifu's teachings and would not contradict them or compare them to any previous training I had received. This was a new path, and I had to be open to it. But in the weeks of grueling training that followed, I would find occasion to regret my commitment.

Sifu began by placing us in Hung Gar jong. It was an agonizingly difficult position. With our arms extended in front of us we had to maintain an extremely low horse stance. We were made to hold it for increasingly longer periods of time and could not move or deviate from our initial position. My legs burned with fatigue, then shook with weakness, and finally threatened to collapse beneath me. At the moment I thought I would fall down, he would always tell me to stand up. "Resting" meant switching to an equally challenging front stance, so that between each group of stances, another set of muscles was exercised. For an instant you were allowed the fleeting hope that training could come to an end, only to find that you were in yet another stance designed to test you. The time

gradually increased in keeping with Sifu's commitment to slow and humane training, but it was always challenging.

The first time we did it, I was determined not to show weakness and thought of all the senseis I had learned from, and how I would let them down if I collapsed or stood up prematurely. I was determined not to let that happen. Sifu told us that if the training became too hard, we could stand up and call his name. Something in me, perhaps just pride, prevented me from doing so. After holding the horse stance, with its two-and-a-half shoulder's width, for forty five minutes, I was at the end of my endurance. Sweat poured off me, and my eyes began to tear. Sifu saw this, watched for a few minutes, then called an end to the session. I had seen him watching me with silent approval, and felt great pride that I had been able to last for such a long time.

Traditionally the time to hold the horse stance had been thirty or forty minutes. It is the length of one incense stick burning. In the old days, sifus would place the stick in a burner. Students were expected to hold the stance for the duration the stick burned. Anything less was considered a sign that you were not sincere. I had read of such training but never actually experienced it. Although my legs were in fairly good shape, they were not trained to the point where they could easily sustain this kind of challenge. I hung on regardless. After each session of jong, we would train in the twelve Hop Gar. They were done with maximum force, the arms swung vigorously. After hundreds of repetitions from a stationary position, we would move across the floor of the kwoon repeating each technique as we went. As a result of this training, our stamina gradually improved, and seeing this, Sifu demanded that we speed up. We would begin at one end of the kwoon

and would not stop until we had reached the other side. After a moment's rest, we would begin again, repeating the moves until they were second nature. After a while, we began to move naturally from the hips and lower part of the body.

Day followed day in the rhythm of basic training: Hung Gar chi kung, followed by jong, then Hop Gar hand techniques. This was our training sequence. It was capped by the Tiger and Crane form, which we were learning section by section. After the first fourteen days we began to notice that our stamina was improving. Sifu was quick to point out that our bodies were toughening, but that it would be some time before we became good at kung fu. We were beginners, he explained, and needed to acclimatize ourselves to the art. He said that this would take time, and that we would need to be patient. Kung fu was meant to be practiced for a lifetime.

At the end of each day we collapsed, grateful for the gift of rest. On this first visit we were being given an introduction to the art of kung fu. That was all. We would have to bury our egos so that we could make real progress. I burned to know more, to practice complex techniques, but Sifu refused to deviate from the traditional curriculum. We would learn as he saw fit, a wisdom that came from decades of immersing himself in the teachings of his masters. Our egos had to be put aside.

This was not done with a sense of malice, but as a teaching tool. We had to become beginners and learn the basics. This was especially true in my case. I already had proficiency at karate. For me the practice of martial arts was synonymous with the hard military focus of karate I had learned twenty-five years before. But that style of karate

was part of the past. I was still not fully immersed in the world of traditional kung fu. Some elusive element was missing. I did not yet know my place.

### *Reaching for Softness*

Finding my place did not promise to be easy. I knew that it existed, that it was in the technique, but knowing this did not bring me any closer to finding it. I practiced the techniques that Sifu taught us, and I often felt clumsy and inept. Nothing came easily. The movements of the Tiger and Crane form were beautiful and dynamic when Sifu did them, but stiff and unwieldy when I performed them. They felt like a piece of clothing belonging to someone else that I had been forced to wear. Each time I practiced the elusive element escaped me. Finally, the issue came to a head on the practice floor.

Jocelyn and I were practicing the Tiger and Crane form, each of us doing it in front of Sifu and May so that we could demonstrate how much of the form we had learned. Jocelyn went first. For her the form was new. Her problem was remembering the order of movements. She didn't try to make the form powerful or fast, and because of that her form was loose and flowing. She went through as much of it as she knew, then sat down with a shy grin to watch me perform.

When my turn came I thought I understood the martial applications and tried to apply speed and power. I knew that the form was long and tried to conserve my energy by doing some parts of the form more softly than others. When I sat down I felt I had done the best I could to do the form. I knew it was designed to be a situation, and that if an observer did not feel that they were watching an actual fight the form was not real.

I was confident that I had shown this and that Sifu would approve. But instead of praising me, he turned to Jocelyn and spoke in Cantonese. May translated with the same spirit and feeling he had communicated, saying that in a month Jocelyn would be better at kung fu than I. I felt as though I had been slapped across the face. My head went down and my face flushed. I was angry and frustrated, and everyone present sensed it. An uncomfortable pall fell across the room, but Sifu would not change what he had said. He meant it. If things did not change, in a month, Jocelyn would be doing better kung fu than I. I was as much confused as hurt. How could someone with a few months training be better than someone who had spent decades in the martial arts? I excused myself from the table and went up onto the roof. I needed time to think. A few moments later Jocelyn followed, and the door opened behind me as she stepped onto the rooftop.

She was upset, and told me that she would not have come to China if it meant that it would cause me this much pain. I snapped at her, and instantly felt sorry that I had done so. My pride had been hurt, and her well-meaning apology had just made it worse. I felt that I was being carried, and that all the years of training, and my position as the authority on the martial arts, had been undermined. For a moment, it seemed that things had been reversed and that somehow she had taken my area of expertise. I was bitter and resentful, and I was not going to make it easy for her. A small fight followed, one I instigated, and after it I felt very small. She was trying to help, to preserve my pride and support the man she loved. In return, I had turned on her and demonstrated petty jealousy. Secretly I felt that I deserved praise, not Jocelyn. There was an uncomfortable silence, and we separated for a few moments, each at different ends of the roof, not

speaking to each other. I was angry because the spirit of kung fu had eluded me. But that was just my ego and my hurt pride.

Why am I, like so many others, cursed with pride and ego? An inflated sense of ego prevents us from learning, blinds us to the obvious facts, and reduces us to childishness. Many times I have felt that my point of view and the issues I am defending have an undeniable solidity and reality. Actually, the opposite is true, but I often cannot be convinced otherwise, and as a result, I revert to reactions that harm myself and others. I had reacted out of a wounded sense of pride, a sense of personal frustration at not being able to master kung fu in a short time. It was the expert mind at work. As a beginner, Jocelyn didn't have any such preconceptions. She just copied the techniques she had been shown, and the results were innocent and uncluttered. This made her kung fu better than mine. Her learning was faster, and her understanding of the techniques she was shown was better, because there was nothing there to interfere. You cannot have a strong opinion when all things are new to you.

After a long silence we began to talk, and although we were both upset, we were able to laugh about the situation. Sifu knew something was wrong, but chose not to go up onto the roof. It was unlikely that he would have offered me any grandfatherly encouragement or kindness anyway. It was up to me to figure out why my kung fu was off. Telling me would not help. Of course, he could have come straight out and told me what was wrong, but how much impact would that have had? It was far better for me to figure out the problem myself. When I knew what the missing element was, there would be an immediate improvement, because the missing physical element was a reflection of

something deeper. My frustration was part of something larger, going back many years to my childhood and youth. Kung fu practice would show me what that was, but I would have to do the work. No one could do it for me.

When Jocelyn left to join Sifu and May I was alone. I stepped back over to the edge of the roof and looked down on the ramshackle houses below. What was missing? What was it, and why couldn't I grasp it, and why was it taking so long to come to terms with it? What had I missed all those years? I had spent so much time, training with so many teachers. How, in all those years, had I managed to miss something so fundamental that I looked clumsy compared to a beginner? I felt powerful. How could this be? Martial arts were designed to be powerful methods of self-defence. Yet the more I attempted to be strong the poorer my kung fu became. The paradox was frustrating.

Suddenly the wind picked up. I could see a clothesline hanging from the rooftops under me. Sheets swayed in the breeze. As I watched, the sheet closest to me played with the one next to it. The ends snapped as fabric touched the line; it was as though it was animate. But the sheet never completely wrapped itself around the line. Each time it seemed ready to do so, a new breeze came up and opened it again, moving it to a new position. It snapped out, becoming rigid, then turned into a soft billowing sail, riding the wind. The line never restricted it. It let whatever happened dictate its moves. I smiled briefly to myself. The missing element had been discovered.

All of the training I had done so far had been too hard. In order to be able to train in the new world of the Chinese martial arts, I would need to react differently. The most important lesson was to abandon power. The lesson of the sheet had been softness. True

softness and true emptiness had to show itself in my kung fu, or I would not make progress. I started to apply the lesson immediately. Whenever I practiced the Tiger and Crane form, I would use as little power as possible. Although it was extremely difficult, I would imitate Sifu's motions, but instead of using power, I would just wave my arms. I had been so preoccupied with power that when I did not use it at all, I reached the correct level. One kind of overcompensation had balanced the other. This soft approach was an extreme reaction, but without it the problem would never be solved. I had to reach an extreme degree of softness before I could understand what kind of power was appropriate.

For the first time, I was beginning to understand the importance of relaxation. In order to learn Sifu's kung fu, I had to relax. It was challenging, but not impossible. What was difficult was understanding what "softness" really meant. The concept of softness also applied to everything outside kung fu. I had to figure out what softness meant in my daily life, and in my relations with others. The lessons that martial arts teach must be applicable in a wider sense. Anyone can be taught to kick or punch, provided they are willing to put in the time and effort. Understanding the wider implications of the arts and the development of gentleness requires much more. Softness can mean compassion, caring for others, and appreciating beauty. Expressing these things is a byproduct of the martial way.

Knowing this did not make practice any easier. Sifu insisted that we continue to hold basic stances for long periods of time. We were still required to practice Hop Gar techniques over and over again, up and down the floor of the kwoon. And we were

starting to practice sparring, which was more difficult than basics. In the Hung Gar system it meant that we would begin with basic blocking, training ourselves to be impervious to the bone-jarring strikes and blocks that are part of the style. It was grueling work. Sifu had us do it so many times that our arms ached. After each session we were given an ointment and told to rub it on our arms. Made from a mixture of herbs, it was designed to protect our arms from becoming too damaged by repeated practice. Medicine and compassionate practice were mixed with technique to reach balance. This was very different from my education in karate in the early nineteen seventies and took some getting used to. In the world of karate, you blocked, and blocked hard, to toughen your body and cope with the pain. There was no consideration given to healing. In the Hong Mong Dong, which was the Chinese name for Sifu's training hall, and meant the "Medical Martial Lodge," healing was essential.

But the soft approach was deceptive. I only needed to practice the blocking techniques or sparring combinations with Sifu to understand this. Once we were talking, and I swung my arm up in imitation of a three-step sparring drill. He raised his in response, and before I knew it, we were blocking each other. I was ten years younger than Sifu and a second degree black belt in karate, yet I couldn't block him successfully. At one point, I was sure he had broken my arm. He was using more than just physical power, and it was something I had seen before but did not yet fully understand. Whatever it was, it made muscular strength seem crude.

I did not understand it then, but I have come to realize since that it was internal power that made it possible for Sifu to project his power so dynamically. It was the

ability to apply chi in such a way that mind became power and power became linked to the fist. The more refined the mind of the master, the more powerful his or her chi. This is what I had experienced when trying to block Sifu's techniques. He had summoned his will, spirit, and chi and directed them to the point of my arm where I was blocking him. The result was a devastating blow. If he had wanted to, he could have easily broken my arm.

The element I didn't have was chi, and its complimentary aspect was softness. I had to learn their importance. If I did not I would not reach a high level of ability in kung fu. This was the lesson Sifu was trying to teach us. The physical techniques did not comprise the core of the teachings. The real curriculum was more intangible. Sifu had told us this verbally, and by example, doing his best to make it clear that we should never become obsessed by strength. People might be capable of great power and speed in their youth, but in time this would fade; if they worked on their chi, strength would actually increase as they grew older, and the internal power of chi would replace the athletic ability they had lost through time. All the same, in the end, age would weaken them, and they would pass away. It was inevitable. The only element not affected by this physical deterioration was the spiritual one: the development of compassion and the perfection of the character of the practitioner. This alone would not weaken or diminish with the passing of years. Spiritual power was the true purpose of kung fu practice.

*A Gift from Wong Fei Hung*

The day after the blocking drill, I vowed to train with complete devotion and to delve into the essence of Sifu's teachings. Jocelyn and I spent a few more days with him, then we returned to Japan. It would be several months before we could return to China. In the years to come we would visit him many times, each time learning something new and reviewing what we had learned already. Each visit was equivalent to months, even years, of training at a kung fu school in Canada or the United States. Now that we were serious students of the Hung Mong Dong, it would require even more commitment to seal the relationship we had begun with him. On our fourth visit, we began to show that commitment and really learn.

It came as a gift, not a physical object or sum of money, but a more in-depth understanding of something we had already started. Sifu began to train us in the more intricate aspects of the form we had already started: the Tiger and Crane. It is a beautiful and complex form, full of quick turns and bold moves. It is also very long, switching back and forth between tiger and crane moves. When the two styles are put together, they form a beautiful set that covers the basics of the Hung Gar style. The form was the creation of the famous Hung Gar master Wong Fei Hung. He exemplified the best aspects of the complete martial artist. As a result, he became a cultural icon, representing all that is good and upright in Chinese culture. Now, we foreigners would study his kung fu and become his student.

Training in the Tiger and Crane was always a challenge. The opening moves were tortuously complex, and they took a long time to learn. I had some background in similar

movements, but the repetitive blocks and techniques were difficult, and I had to do them again and again. The form also required great leg strength since it demanded that we hold the horse stance for long periods of time while we performed many hand techniques. The form develops sequentially and symmetrically, so that when we performed something on one side of the body, we did it on the other side as well. The full Tiger and Crane form takes a long time to perform, being well over one hundred moves.

But it is beautiful. It moves gracefully from stationary techniques in a standing position to bold, powerful moves in a horse stance, then begins to move across the floor, shifting and sliding, changing stances to demonstrate both tiger and crane moves, jumping, blocking, and beautifully evading, to culminate at the end of the form in a series of beautiful jumping moves and, finally, in the ending salutations. The sound of movement and the smell of incense, punctuated by Sifu's good-natured instructions, set up a powerful training rhythm. With each trip to China, I severed my old associations with karate and replaced them with new ones from kung fu. The smell and feel of a hardwood floor, and the crisp snap of a karate gi, were replaced by the scent of incense and the sight of a shrine. The hard linear movements of a reverse punch or front kick were replaced by circular butterfly palm blocks and sweeping crescent kicks. The boldly stated dojo oath became the lighting of incense sticks and a bow to the kung fu ancestors.

One kind of wisdom was replaced by another. Both aimed for the same objective, but the approach was different. Both karate and kung fu had a great deal to offer. For people who began their career in kung fu, karate seemed simple. They were sometimes relieved to leave the clutter and seemingly ineffectual ceremonial techniques of kung fu

behind. I had known such people. One friend told me that he thought karate was “pure” because it had no weaponry. That was true for him, but for me kung fu was the purer art because it was closer to the original martial arts from which karate sprang, and it had *more* to offer because it included weapons. Once out of the modern curriculum of karate, I felt free to look at things from a different viewpoint.

As a young karateka, I had loved aphorisms and had often discussed the deeper meaning of the martial arts. My dojo mates had often been amused by this. To them karate was a sport or an activity. Philosophy was secondary. Karate was about fighting, and spirituality was irrelevant. But kung fu was different. Sifu was not shy in speaking about philosophy or the Buddhist foundations of this art. With his limited English and the help of May, he spent hours talking to us about the importance of an ethical foundation to kung fu practice. He repeatedly said that kung fu without service was not martial arts. Although he was a devout Buddhist, he de-emphasized religion, stressing that no matter what your religious background, you should try to help others. He encouraged us to meditate and read widely and put great emphasis on the search for truth. He said that the kung fu forms reflected this, that they were symbols of a greater truth. We should never stop, he said, with the physical techniques, but delve more deeply into their true meaning.

Being able to speak freely of these things was wonderful, but not common. Gichin Funakoshi, the modern founder of karate, unlike other karate masters, had been a Confucian scholar; but he was an exception to the rule. For most modern martial artists there was a gap between ideals and practice.

In the Hung Mong Dong there was no gap, because ethical practice of kung fu was part of the curriculum. This was not part of every kung fu school. For many competition and trophies were the main focus, and the teacher admitted it. This was what Wu Shu was about, pure athletics based on competition. It was fine as long as the practitioner was honest, but for me there had to be more to the martial arts.

After we had trained for many months in the Tiger and Crane form, Sifu gave us two gifts, one was the little known Damo Hands form. Named after the ancient founder of Zen Buddhism, it contained no punching but relied on open-handed palm and slapping techniques. It was an elegant and powerful form. His second gift was the Yang Family spear. He felt that we should gain some experience with weapons. When we returned to Canada we would be practicing on our own. Like good teachers everywhere, he did not want us to become too bored and let our kung fu practice go because we found it dull .

As well as the two-man sets, he taught us countless drills and fighting forms designed to broaden our knowledge and experience. Most of these came from the Hung Gar or Choy Lay Fut styles, but there were others as well. We learned the long two man sparring sets of Hung Gar, the Seven Star combat and blocking drills of Choy Lay Fut, and other forms and combinations from different styles. Whenever Sifu felt that we needed to learn something, he would unveil it to us, and then drill us until we understood it completely. After that, he would take us back to jong and retrain us until we understood all of the material we had recently learned plus the old material we had gone through before. Eventually we would become complete kung fu practitioners capable of

responding with whatever technique was appropriate and, at the same time, completely understanding the background of our art.

*Rats in Back Alleys*

Despite the higher spiritual aims of kung fu, we were still practicing in China. Every night Sifu would take us for long walks through the dusty streets of Guangzhou. Sometimes, if we had been practicing a lot of jong, or had finished a challenging day of forms, the walking would be a real test. We would walk behind him as he strode at a breakneck pace through the small alleys and back streets. If we fell behind, we would become lost and would have to find our way home alone. Neither of us could speak Chinese fluently enough to survive, so this was a daunting prospect. We usually managed to keep up with him, or at least keep him in sight no matter how quickly he walked. Several times I saw Sifu glancing back with a sly smile on his face. He enjoyed the difficulty we were having keeping up with him.

Thanks to a lifetime of training, he had strong legs and unending stamina. Everything was of interest to him, and he often stopped to talk with people he knew or started conversations with people who looked interesting. Every store and old building fascinated him, and he could tell stories about each street and building in the old city. He could trace some back to the Ching dynasty; others were the buildings of his youth. He would stop to talk about the way he once swam in a river where a building now stood, how he had played in courtyards now covered by a shopping mall, or how the state-owned temples were not really temples but bureaucratic institutions devoid of true

Buddhism. The buildings he hated the most were the new shopping malls built with Hong Kong money. These he referred to as the buildings of the “big bosses,” the tycoons centred in Hong Kong, representing the power and wealth of the overseas Chinese. Chow hated them. For a traditionalist they were anathema, having no reverence for the past. As we passed each development, with its pile of rubble made up of the bricks of old buildings, and fenced in with construction boards, Chow would curse them and shake his head. The change was too fast he would say, and no good for China.

On one of our walks a young woman stepped out of a restaurant and into the muddy street. She was young and pretty, perhaps twenty two years old. Dressed in Western-style nightclub clothes, she navigated her way through the street debris in her high heels. She was completely modern, and would have been comfortable in Hong Kong or any large Western city. She was tiptoeing through the dirt, and we were following behind, when suddenly she let out a piercing, high-pitched scream. A rat the size of a small dog had run over her foot. She burst out laughing. What shocked her was not the rat but the fact that she had been caught unawares. Sifu laughed too, and afterward they spoke in rapid Cantonese and there was more laughter. Jocelyn and I were not as amused. We didn't find the spectacle of rats running over people's feet as funny as they did. I was particularly disgusted. I have always hated rats. Being relatively poor as a child, I had seen many. The idea that rats might be a regular part of daily life was not exactly a charming thought, but to Sifu and the young woman it was hilarious.

The Chinese have integrated all of this into the fabric of their lives. It has always been so, and it may always be so; there has always been a lot of dirt and there will always

be a lot of it. Rats are part of life; they will always be so. They are part of the fabric of things, and until mainland China becomes more modern, they will always scurry through the back streets of Guangzhou.

I paused and thought about what this meant. Every few days I had to flee to the White Swan hotel to recuperate from the hard training and lack of amenities I experienced in Sifu's home. There I ate a Western breakfast in a five-star hotel in an air-conditioned room amid the trappings of North American life. It brought me back to "normal living." But was it "normal" or just normal for the West? In North America many people lead mundane unfulfilling lives, and they dream of stepping out of their comfort zone into an adventure where the predictable round of daily life will be shaken up. They book "eco-adventures" and avidly watch "reality shows" to gain a taste of what it is like to be uncomfortable. They want to be troubled so that they can live.

But in other parts of the world discomfort is part of everyday living. Breakfast at the White Swan hotel would be a wonderful dream. Who lives the better life? I had difficulty answering this question, striking as it did at the very heart of what makes a good life. Certainly we had seldom felt as alive as we did when training with Sifu. We felt as though we never wanted to leave his small training hall, just stay there forever and learn the martial arts. It had nothing to do with the appearance of the place, or the rundown nature of the buildings or streets. We liked the fact that things were worn and imperfect, and we also felt that what we were doing was more significant than many of the things we wasted time worrying about in the West. Was life better in Sifu's training hall than it was in a cleaner, modern, and more controlled suburb in the West?

We had long conversations about it, disturbed by the possibility that in living amidst the rich trappings of the West we were trapping ourselves in a kind of half-life where the endless grind of acquiring material objects caused us to ignore more important things, such as personal development and spiritual progress. How should we spend the rest of our lives? We discussed this long into the night, in restaurants and during walks in Sifu's neighbourhood. We talked about which direction we should go, and what we should do in the future. It might be possible for us to continue to live in Asia, studying the martial arts and developing ourselves, working part of the year in Japan, and living for the rest in China. We might eventually become accomplished martial arts and healing masters and perhaps would accumulate enough materially so that we could live comfortably. But doing so meant that we would forsake the traditional security of the West, the pensions and portfolios, the houses and the other possessions of North American life.

How would we feel about this in our seventies and eighties? Perhaps material security would have eluded us because we had lived in a non-traditional way. It was normal for us to celebrate Asian holidays as well as Western ones. I dreamed in Japanese. Eastern food was normal for us, and there were many customs we preferred to those of the West. Where did all of this leave us? Not entirely Western and not entirely Asian. We were beginning to experience a lot of confusion. This was even more intense for me, since most of my life had been lived conceptually split between the East and West. We had to make a decision. In which world would we now live? To what degree did we want to live between worlds? The issue had built up over many years to the point where we now had

to decide whether or not we wanted to continue with our present life style, or return for good to Canada and the life we had known before.

The incident of the rats incident outlined in stark relief the poverty and physical insecurity of the East. There were no tidy pension plans in China, and precious few in Japan. For foreigners there was not much except the national health plan. Yet juxtaposed against these negatives was the richness of the training and knowledge of Asia. Which would we choose? Was it possible to synthesize both, to gain the best of both worlds by melding them in some fashion that would ultimately produce a satisfying life? We did not know, but we knew that the decision was pressing itself upon us. We had visited China many times, had trained hard with Sifu, and had continued training in the parks and training halls of Japan. We had worked hard to become members of Sifu's family, and had committed ourselves to his way of training. We had met many wonderful teachers and worked to internalize their teachings. But there had been sacrifice as well. While we were directing our time and effort toward these goals, our friends in North America had been starting families, collecting money in their pensions, and paying down the mortgages on their homes. We had gained immeasurably in experience, but we did not have much materially in comparison to our Western friends. In some ways we were behind. The decision about what to do was difficult, and it was about to become even harder.

*In the Temple of Ming Na*

Sifu made it more difficult. Every day brought some new and fascinating experience, and each one showed us that we had changed and were now different from our

North American friends. Six-and-a-half years overseas had made it so. We could not go back and erase these years. We could not think as we once had. Events had changed us, expanded our viewpoints, and made us different from others. It couldn't be helped.

One morning Sifu showed us this. We got up early and had a small breakfast of rice gruel and dumplings. Then we worked out doing forms. This had become a traditional way of greeting the morning, a way of stretching, awakening, and getting our bodies moving. Usually we would have some tea and talk for a while, followed by a serious workout in which we learned something new or added to something we had already studied.

But this particular morning, Sifu cut our routine short and announced that we would be going somewhere special. We took a last gulp of tea, got on the old beaten bicycles he had provided for us and, together with May Kwan, headed out into the streets. The four of us worked our way through the traffic, weaving through the crowds and cutting through alleys as we bicycled further and further away from Sifu's home. It was early morning, and Guangzhou was just coming alive, as people woke up and got ready for the day. Everywhere you could see young and old alike, awakening to the life of a vibrant city.

After forty minutes we stopped in front of a nondescript brick building and parked our bicycles. Sifu took us inside, and we smelled the pungent aroma of Chinese incense and heard the sounds of holy texts being chanted. This was Ming Na's temple. Sifu was as happy as a small child, delighting in everything, talking to as many people as

he could, joking and carrying on, displaying the kind of happiness you only see from those who are truly content.

He took us to the third floor of the building where we were joined by a group of people chanting prayers. There were several nuns present, as well as several hundred lay people. The chanting was deep and melodious, and everyone was intent on it. I could see that Sifu knew the litany by heart and that he did not need to refer to a text. I found myself once again deeply impressed by his depth of knowledge and the power of his mind. Watching him through the swirling clouds of incense, I knew that he was a true master. He had created a unique fusion of spirituality and martial arts, and I felt honored to have been his student.

After prayers were over he introduced us to Ming Na. She surprised me. Sifu had spoken of her with great reverence. Yet the woman in front of me had the look of a matronly servant. She was portly and moved ponderously. What stood out, however, were her eyes. Deep and luminous, they took in everything around her. They were full of power in repose and deeply compassionate, the eyes of a Buddhist master. She was aware and living in each moment, vibrant and brimming with knowledge of the Dharma. I had seen such eyes only once before during a conversation with a Zen master. Ming Na was obviously at the same level of spiritual strength and power.

She stepped past me and made her way to Jocelyn. Although neither could speak the other's language, there was an instant bond. They sensed something in each other, and Ming Na pressed a small Buddhist amulet into Jocelyn's hands and then clasped them together. The amulet, she said, was a blessing and something to remind Jocelyn of her

visit to the temple. The figure of Gwan Yin exemplified compassion, and Ming Na said that Jocelyn should always keep it close to her heart. The amulet would help her. She asked that Jocelyn always wear it and, when not wearing it, keep it in a place of honour. Sifu smiled broadly, beaming at the great gift given to his student by his mentor. It was a great moment to see these two united in a spiritual bond.

We stayed for tea with Sifu, May, and Ming Na, and master Ming invited some of the nuns to spend some time with us. They thought this was a great novelty and crowded into Ming Na's small office. There they spoke in rapid Cantonese, gesticulating and pointing at us while laughing. Neither Jocelyn nor I felt ridiculed by this. We knew that they were not making fun of us, just fascinated. Although the temple was dirty, we felt as we had in Sifu's kwoon, that the dirt did not matter but that the priceless experience did.

### *A Startling Reflection*

Our last six months in Japan were uneventful. We worked at our college. Together we continued to practice the Tiger and Crane form, and I met Derek and the other members of the Hung Mong Dong to practice Hsing I and other arts we had learned from Sifu. Each of us specialized in one of the types of kung fu Sifu taught, but we practiced each other's styles as well. It was a way of learning Sifu's way without having to make separate long-term trips to China. By working together, we could practice each other's arts, while at the same time furthering our own.

Beyond the regular rhythm of Japanese life, there was not much of note. We had become so accustomed to Asia that when we spoke of home, we did not mean Canada, we meant Japan. The daily round of life, with its noodle shops, holidays, and customs rooted in the rhythm of the Japanese year was normal. Our memories of Canada were foreign elements in a life so entrenched in the Japanese way that green tea was our preferred beverage, and Western food was heavy and unpalatable. We loved the culture and customs of our adopted nation, but knew that a lifetime of being Canadian could not be erased easily. We never spoke of the decision we had to make, but the issue was there, and we knew that we would eventually have to deal with it.

Our entire married lives had been in Japan. The friendships we had built there were the fabric of our world. Leaving them would be painful. We would be leaping into the darkness, gambling with our future. We knew it, but also knew that a decision had to be made. Otherwise we might drift, never achieving a lasting and permanent life in either place. After much discussion, we decided to visit Sifu one more time, learn as much as we could, and then make a decision on our return. I was forty years old, an important age. In Taoist terms, I was in the summer of my life, young, but not a youth, the season in which it is necessary to reflect deeply on where you are going and what you are doing.

We told Sifu that we would like to train with him again, and he agreed. The time we set was a month-long training course. May had translated our letters into Chinese, explaining them to Sifu, letting him know that everything had been organized. The decision about which direction to take was made for us. It happened in an unusual way, and not in China, but in Japan.

Whenever we travelled, we used the Japanese entry point at Narita airport. We always went directly to the gate for Japanese citizens. It made more sense than being processed on the foreigner's side. We had lived in Japan for over six years, I spoke Japanese, and because we were residents, it was easier for them to stamp our passports and wave us through. We occasionally met with complications, usually from well-meaning Japanese who thought we had gotten lost and gone to the wrong gate. But normally we were passed through without incident or difficulty. When a Japanese asked if I needed help, I would reply in Japanese and they would nod and apologize for having inconvenienced us.

The entry foyer had a large reflecting metallic surface. It was like a polished metal mirror. Once, while waiting to return to Japan, I saw my reflection. The man standing there was Japanese. The body was mine, the same features and height, but the posture, facial expression, and carriage were that of a Japanese male. I was shocked, and knew then that I would return to Canada. I needed to regain the Western man I could not see. I knew that if I did not return to Canada, I would lose that part of me forever. That night in our apartment I told Jocelyn that I thought it was time to leave, that not much more could be served by our staying in Japan, and that I felt we needed to go home.

She saw the wisdom in it, but it took many conversations over the next few weeks to come to a final decision. Finally we committed ourselves and set a date for departure. Japan had given us so much that leaving was difficult. We would be returning to our own culture, going back to the familiar. But we had been gone for a long time, and many things in Canada had changed. There were changes in the political and economic makeup of the

country, making it different from the Canada we had left. Many of our friends and acquaintances had moved on. We knew that if we stayed in Japan these differences would only become more pronounced and that we would eventually become unfamiliar with the fabric of Canadian life. Our parents were growing older. If we stayed in Japan, we might risk returning only to witness their deaths.

Seeing myself in the mirror brought these issues into sharp focus. At roughly the same time, our college informed us that our contract was due to expire. A colleague told us that he had overheard one of the administrators talking about us, discussing the end of our teaching tenure. Events forced a decision that we had already made, in a way, making our resolution easier. An outside force had made the decision for us and propelled us toward our return, but not before we visited Sifu one more time.

### *The Sword of the Dragon Pool*

The sun beats down on me mercilessly. My tee shirt is soaked with sweat, and my legs scream for rest. Sifu keeps at me, calling out the cadence of the training rhythm. Twist and turn, rise and strike, dip low, then lunge forward, twist and cut, slice across the imaginary opponent's body, stomp and strike high three times, to end in a low bow stance. Each time my feet strike the tiles of Guan Shi temple courtyard, the dust rises in little clouds. Next, walk forward briskly, the broadsword slicing in a figure eight pattern, cut through the guard of the man in front of me, then envelope his blade and cast it to one side. The tip of the weapon flicks forward, and the main part of the blade reverberates with a resounding smack. I turn quickly to face another opponent, smacking his imaginary

blade away, and come down with a crushing blow, the broadsword using its own momentum to deliver the final strike; then comes the last salutation as the form comes to an end.

I am practicing the Sword of the Dragon Pool broadsword, an arcane and difficult form that takes all of my martial skill, the accumulation of decades of martial practice, to master. Sifu is completing the last cycle of our training. He knows that we will be returning home, and that he might not see us for years. It is important that he give us as much knowledge as he can before we leave. He is determined to push us. The friendly Sifu we had known before has been replaced by a taskmaster. There is no tea now, and there are many commands to repeat the form just one more time. “One more time” always turns out to be several in a row, and prearranged sparring sequences are becoming more and more intense.

On this day, practicing in the courtyard of a Buddhist temple on the outskirts of Guangzhou, he is harsh and demanding. My hips are not turning right; the turns are clumsy and poorly balanced; I will have to practice more seriously in the future; I should not hold my breath; I should not grip the sword so frantically—to grip the sword so is the mark of a beginner; I should drop my shoulders; have I not learned this already on a previous visit? Have I not practiced the martial arts for many years? Relax, move smoothly, and so on. The litany of criticism continues, and I see a different side of my teacher. It is time for this side of him to emerge. There is a time to lay back and a time to push, and now is a time to push. The Sword of the Dragon Pool form is challenging; it

deserves more than a half-hearted attempt. To practice it in a poor way is an insult to the kung fu ancestors who have given so much to create it.

And so I find myself baking in the afternoon sun, sweating with the strain of coordinating my movements, with the meter of curved steel occupying all of my effort and much of my concentration. To fail to commit will produce a half-hearted result. The foundation of my advanced skill in kung fu will depend upon the degree of my dedication now. Sifu is helping to build it by pushing me to the limits of my endurance. And so I am told to repeat it again, do it one more time, try again, this time with feeling, in an endless stream of practice sessions that render me so exhausted that it is difficult to lower myself into bed at night and difficult to get out of bed the next morning.

Jocelyn trains as well, and occasionally we train together, but not with the same degree of intensity, and she is not being pushed in the same way that I am. Sifu has made it clear that, for this last visit, my training is the main focus of his efforts. In the unspoken way that a serious training contract is forged, I will be pushed as never before.

After putting down the sword, it is time to do Chang Chuan, an old form of kung fu, strong in basic movements, powerful, deep, and low. It is a foundation for the other types of kung fu that I will be doing with and without weapons. I begin at the attention stance, swing up my fists, bring them down in a wide arc, then punch out with a reverse punch, cocking the other fist to my hip. Like Shotokan, Chang Chuan has beautiful basics. The movements are powerful and lithe, springing from the legs and hips, feet gripping the ground to generate the kind of legendary power that kung fu and karate are famous for. Next I kick and punch at the same time, thrusting forward and moving in a

series of five movements one after the other, as though chasing an elusive opponent, then shifting into palm strikes, and turning to strike in the opposite direction. Each series of Chang Chuan becomes more and more complex, until in the last ones, I am jumping and doing flying kicks, turning in elaborate spins and sweeping moves, and practicing the full range of advanced kung fu, flowing from one move to the next with as much agility and grace as I can muster.

“Fang song, fang song!!” yells Sifu “Relax, relax!!” But it is difficult to relax through the sweat and dust on my face and the burning ache in my limbs. Today I have gone through the entire Chang Chuan sequence at least ten times. Chang Chuan is known as “long shadow boxing,” and as I look at my shadow in the sun-soaked tiles of the temple, I see the form of a thin and exhausted martial artist. We have been practicing for two hours without a break. Finally, Sifu stops me and calls a small break for tea. During it he speaks of the history of Chang Chuan, its creators, and the honesty of the style with its straightforward moves and clean lines. He tells stories of his training days as a boy when he was taught the style by his uncles and kung fu seniors. He speaks of the need for a code of behavior in kung fu, that each Chinese boxer must find his way to self-perfection through the practice of his art. The code helps the boxer find his centre until self-perfection manifests itself. The way to such perfection is through practice, continual, unceasing, daily practice. Then Sifu tells me to get on my feet again, to go out to the middle of the courtyard to practice yet another form. Each is framed by Chang Chuan and broadsword practice, then another is taught.

At the end of the first day, I can barely sit down. Getting up requires a slow lifting with both arms until I am in a semi-standing position and, finally, a shove until I was fully upright. The next five days are grueling. Each time I wonder whether I would be able to continue. I am sure at one point or another that I will rip or tear a muscle or injure myself in some way that will finish me. Yet, miraculously, the next day, after long and painful stretching exercises, I begin again. Sifu would call out the rhythm of training, and I would move to it. Sometimes he would use the traditional hung gar drum and pound out the beat that practitioners since Wong Fei Hung had used to time their moves. The rhythm was hypnotic and kept me going when I thought I no longer could, when my legs were searing with pain and my lungs felt as though they would burst.

When the training became unbearable, Sifu would pick a new weapon, the straight sword, spear, or staff, and begin to teach a new form. Then he would demonstrate it himself, the sword whirling around him, slicing the air with a moaning sucking sound. The strength and power of his moves turned the steel into a living entity. When I practiced, it was movement, when he did it, the personality of the form emerged, and Sifu and the sword became one.

It was the same with the staff, spear, or any other weapon. Suddenly, it became alive, took on a life of its own, and the form became real. If it was Kun Lun mountain straight sword, then the movements showed the stately nature of that form. Broad and expansive, like a tall and wide-based mountain, the form took on its creator's vision. The movements became grand and sweeping, but at the same time upright and strong. There were turns, darting moves, and sudden thrusts and cuts, but the power and dignity of the

form remained. I would practice it until the sweat covered me, and my tee shirt and track pants were soaked. Then, I would pick up a staff and practice the Monkey King form.

On the third day, the halfway point of learning the form, Sifu laughed, saying that this was not the way the form was done. He took the staff out of my hands and performed it himself in the center of the courtyard. The weapon sucked the air around it, making the distinctive sound that only a true weapons master could produce. The two meters of bamboo became a snake, darting, sweeping, twirling, and enveloping the weapon or hand of the imaginary opponent who had dared to challenge the celestial deity for whom the form was named. But more impressive than the clean lines and sharp movements of the techniques was the personality of the Monkey King. The tricky and mischievous nature of the Buddhist folk hero emerged in the form. When Sifu performed it, he became the Monkey King, travelling to the Western paradise with his companions, protecting the Buddhist virtues through a hilarious series of adventures and mishaps. The form told the story, and the movements mimicked the tale. It was full of quick turns, mischievous jumps, and darting moves, with monkey-like looks and rapid head movements.

Today, the sixth in the training cycle, the form I am given is the Sword of the Dragon Pool. The form is brilliant, but cruelly demanding. It keeps me down in a crouched position, move after move, the broadsword slicing again and again, but the position is always the same: low and taxing, with no chance for relief in the widespread stances and quick changes. Here there is a thrust and slash, there a series of dipping moves and circular blocks that make my arm ache with the pure physical demand of the technique.

Just as I become accustomed to the rhythm, the movements change again, and I come up, stomp, then work in a higher position, no longer crouching, but upright as the sword winds itself around my back and shoulders, using the agile and athletic techniques of Northern China. Then come a series of cannon kicks, the heel coming down sharply while the other foot rises up in an arc to an imaginary opponent's head or torso. The form is unforgiving, powerful, demanding, and elusive, its personality hard to capture, and its theme hard to define. Yet it has to be mastered. Sifu is not satisfied until the movements show the heart of the form. It is not enough just to do the moves, he says, the form must have life. You must be like a dragon swimming in deep and murky water, the water of the dragon pool. Like the dragon, you must rear up and thrash your limbs, rising up and striking, up and out of the murky waters with whip-like intensity and strength that can strike down an opponent. The movement of your tail should crush those around you: and in this form, the tail was the broadsword.

Today the training is getting to me, its intensity sapping my remaining strength. Sifu stands up and asks me if I would like to stop, but I wave him off. He laughs. This is good, he says, keep training. But I am more tired than I can ever remember being at the Hoitsugan, or any training seminar in my karate days. It is a deep fatigue with a strange quality to it, not just muscle ache but more, as though my body is saying that if I do not make the decision to sit down, it will make it for me. I hold up my right hand, indicating that I need a moment, then bend over and hold my knees, panting with the strain of the last few series of moves. After a moment, I stand up and signal that I am ready to go on. He waits, as though not believing that I will be able to continue, but the look I give him

says that I am not fooling around. I know that if I do not push now, the breakthrough to a higher level of kung fu will not take place, and I will be trapped at a mediocre level. Sifu knows it too. It is a risky time. Without the will to push on, the barrier it will not be broken. I need to be shaken up, not just challenged. Sword of the Dragon Pool form is just what I need to reach the state of selflessness leading to true progress. But there is a price.

Sifu has never truly sparred with me before. He has trained me, and he has driven me hard many times, but we have never actually fought, never crossed hands in the traditional way. Now we are about to. Forms practice is over. The weapons are put away, swords in their scabbards, staffs in their long cotton carrying cases, and Sifu beckons me over. We begin to practice the first moves in a prearranged sparring sequence. It is bold and powerful, opening with a tiger move, and continuing in a series of blocks, strikes, punches, and kicks. At first we practice slowly, but then we begin to speed up. The punches come faster and faster, the overhand strikes loop above me, then come crashing down with a frightening intensity, the kicks slice out toward their targets, each time coming dangerously close to a vital area. His arm is like iron, immovable, full of internal power, and dense, like a metal club. His forearm crashes into my punches, and it feels as though he will break the bones beneath the tightly tensed flesh. Suddenly, deadly serious, I can hear my heart beating, a powerful drum pounding adrenaline-enhanced fear and exhilaration.

I break free and step back, panting and looking at him warily. What is he up to? He has never been like this before. I look into his eyes trying to find some sign of the kind teacher who introduced me to drinking tea in the martial arts, but the eyes that stare back

are blank, a fathomless enigma. From his guard, with one foot touching the ground in a high cat stance and one hand above him, I can see no opening and no sign of Chow Kai Lung. Whoever this man is, he is warrior incarnate, power in reserve, the terrible gathering of a human storm about to unleash itself. Then he strikes.

His front foot shifts, and when I break my concentration to glance at it, he springs forward, his fists a rapid blur aimed at my head and torso. Full of the adrenaline-induced rush of combat, I block one punch, then another, half block a third, but the fourth crashes into my chest. Somehow, from somewhere, I summon the memory of meeting an attack with my spirit so that when the punch lands I am ready for it, and shift, switching the target area to my chest so that the damage is minimal. Had he landed it on my solar plexus, I would be down already, winded or unconscious. Now I am angry and strike back. But it is controlled anger, and I use the phoenix eye fist to return his attack, followed by a series of kicks designed to drive him back. Each kick is aimed at a different vulnerable point: instep, shin, groin, knee, instep, shin, and so on, until he has been driven back six or eight feet. But none of the kicks make contact; he is too agile, coordinated and fast, and on the last kick, he hooks my foot and drops me. I twist in mid-air and kick upward so that I turn and fall into a counterattack. It is a classic move from two-man tiger and crane form. Too classic. Sifu sees it coming and swats away the kick I aim at his chest, kicking down at me in turn in rapid succession, so fast that I have to roll on the ground to escape, and he follows me with technique after technique, until I manage to get up and assume a fighting stance.

There is nothing prearranged about it. By anyone's standards this is full-out free sparring, fighting, not practicing. Suddenly, in the way that sometimes comes over one in the martial arts, I am no longer myself. I do not know who I am. I come from the warrior heart of clear action, unrehearsed, spontaneous, driven by the searing reality of combat; I am technique and response, and Perry does not exist. Sifu presses the attack again, coming at me with the looping arm techniques of Choy Lay Fut, overhead strikes, leopard fist techniques, and long-range back fist strikes. I counter by shifting backward with Hung Gar footwork and blocking, breaking up the powerful rhythm of his attacks by using the evasion techniques of the Crane style and striking out at his attacking arms with the pressure point techniques hidden in the forms I have been taught, desperately searching my memory for any technique that he might be unfamiliar with. Suddenly it comes. In an instant I remember that he does not like the Wing Chun style. That which you do not like, you neglect or disdain. In one quick move, I close the gap and lash out with a Wing Chun front kick. The sole of my foot makes contact with his chest, but he is able to catch the end of it and sweeps it aside, so that the full force of the technique does not land. But I have landed a technique and wounded him. He switches to Hsing I, penetrating my guard with a wood strike; I counter with a fire block, and he drives home a furious series of punches and kicks, some landing, some brushed aside at the last minute. Now I must think. How am I going to win this contest, which is even now degenerating into an all-out fight? What has happened to Sifu?

I step back and kick. It is my strong point. My legs are long, and if I can keep him at bay, I may be able to gain time for a stronger technique. Perhaps one of the kicks will

land, looping through his guard and coming down on an exposed area. If I watch carefully, I should be able to spot an exposed point and exploit it. I attack immediately. I know that in a real encounter I could not afford the luxury of thinking or pausing. To break the tempo and confuse him, I suddenly use karate, lunging forward with a front snap kick and then, in a desperate gamble, I swing around without chambering the leg, using an ax kick in the hope that it will be different enough to startle him and create an opening. But he has seen something like it before and dropping under it, he attacks once again, aiming his kick at my ankle. I see it coming and jump up, lifting my vulnerable left foot and landing my kicking leg on the courtyard tiles. He lands a second kick of his own, perfectly timed, which catches me just as my upraised body comes to earth. It pushes me back and winds me, but I manage to step and shuffle back twice, just in time to assume a fighting stance again.

We glare at each other, ready to go again, then suddenly Sifu's eyes soften. He begins to laugh. I am deep in fighting mode, possessed by the frenzy of combat, but then I begin to laugh as well. I look across the courtyard at Jocelyn and May and see that both of them are aghast. Neither of them could have imagined that something like this would have happened. They have stopped their practice and are looking at us wide eyed, as though they have seen demons possess two people they love. They do not understand that a test was been given, and, at the time, neither did I.

Sifu wanted to see how much my training had taken hold, and how I would react. Evidently I passed, because at the end of it, with the women rushing in toward us, he is laughing loudly and patting me on the back. I am laughing too, perhaps as a release from

the powerful adrenaline rush of combat. I had feared that it was real, and in the heat of battle it had felt very real, as though something had happened to us and we had taken leave of our senses. But even in this, wearing the blank look of a hardened fighter, Sifu had been able to discern appropriate from inappropriate action. The free fighting had been an examination and a reminder that the training we did in the classical martial arts sometimes had to be applied to the world of street combat. It was the price to be paid in order to test the art and keep its fighting elements alive. It had to be real.

We went back to regular forms practice, but I never forgot that day or its intensity. It had been frightening and exhilarating, and it had contained a lesson that I had almost forgotten. For something to have lasting value, it sometimes has to be put to the test. If not, it may wither and die in the smothering blanket of complacency. Sifu had administered a timely test to keep this from happening. I had been lucky. Given an all-out confrontation, it is unlikely that I would have prevailed. We both knew that. I had acquitted myself well, and there had been a fair exchange of technique. That was a sign of my progress in the martial arts, and a tribute to the quality of his teaching. In the next few weeks, we continued to train, but without the intensity and reality of an all out sparring engagement. Instead Sifu taught me new technique combinations and a full repertoire of two- man sparring sets. Occasionally we free sparred, but in a controlled way. That was, after all, the way I learned best.

*Snow Cranes*

We reached the last week of our training in the spring of 1996. We knew that there were only a few days left to us in China. Sifu knew it too, as did May, and in the last few days of training, the kwoon took on a somber tone. More than once May's eyes welled up with tears, and one morning Auntie gave Jocelyn her Guan Yin amulet, hugged her fiercely, and cried at the prospect that we might not see each other again. Sifu, too, was emotional, although he showed it less, and remarked that we probably would not see each other for another ten years. We assured him that it was not so, but we honestly did not know when we would meet again. We were returning to uncertainty. As far as we knew, we might be back in Asia and training with him in six months or never see him again. We just did not know.

In the last week he trained us in two new forms, the "five animals" form from Hung Gar and the Choy Lay Fut young monk form, and we reviewed everything we had learned from him on all of our visits in the preceding years. It seemed as if we had known him for a very long time. Sifu was lighthearted and upbeat, telling us to keep training, and not to forget to do our chi kung every morning. We spent our spare time talking about the martial arts and Chinese history. In the evenings we watched kung fu movies. Sifu especially liked the epics about the Shaolin monastery, and for fun we memorized the theme song from Jet Li's classic 1985 movie *Shaolin Temple*. We would sing or hum it

while helping Sifu clean up or after practices. It became a kind of joke. We still walked in the evenings, and went to restaurants where Sifu knew the owners or manager. He seemed to know everyone.

People who had come to know us began to call out our names. It was a final form of acceptance. We felt that perhaps in some way we had made an impression. Yok Hoi, the little boy from next door, came over, and when his parents told him that we were leaving, he burst into tears. His mother tried to console him, but he cried until she took him home, and we were not far from tears ourselves. Somehow his reaction mirrored our own feelings and showed the tug we felt for the place that had become our second home in Asia. Sifu watched him mutely, and when the boy was out of sight, burst into laughter. He said that it was one of the funniest things he had ever seen and one of the few times he had seen Yok Hoi react so strongly.

Two nights before our departure something extraordinary happened. We were getting ready for our last training session when Sifu came downstairs dressed in the robes of a Chinese gentleman. His face was uncharacteristically serious, and we had no idea what he was up to. Whatever it was, it was important. He carried a roll of Chinese calligraphy paper and a full set of brushes. Without a word, he spread a large piece of paper out on the table. Using four carved stone weights, he secured the paper, then smiled broadly. He had asked May to be there, and she too was smiling. Sifu mixed some ink, poured us some tea, and began to speak. He explained that, as a going away gift, he was going to write us a poem. It would be something we would have forever. He hoped that it would remind us of him in those days when we were far away and he had no way

of seeing us. These things were important, he said, because even though we were not with him, we were still a part of his family.

He took a medium-sized brush and began to write. The paper took the ink well, and beautiful cursive letters began to appear in well-formed rows on the sheet in front of him. His hand was strong, and the way he wrote showed us that he was an accomplished warrior and a great man. As he wrote, he explained. The poem was an ancient one dating from the Tang dynasty. It was a poem of farewell based on a natural scene. Each year, the poem said, the cranes come to visit in the winter, leaving their footprints in the snow. They are destined to depart again, leaving only the footprints to remind us that they have come at all, but we need not be sad, for the footprints of the cranes are a reminder that they will return. Friendship is like the cranes. We shall meet again. Old friends will return; we need only look in the snow for a sign of their fidelity and have faith that it will be so. In the same way, all true friends leave a sign that what they have is deep and abiding. Though it may seem that they shall not see each other, one day they will meet again.

The poem was a beautiful reminder of the years we had spent with Sifu and an endearing promise of many more to come. When the ink had dried, he rolled up the poem and bound it so that it could not be damaged. While May translated, he explained that he wanted to give us something else. From two small boxes he removed a pair of traditional stone seals. They had been carved with our Chinese names: Hung Fu and Hung Ha. Each box had a small container of red ink. They were martial seals to be used by us as members of the Hung Mong Dong for our student's certificates, should we some day wish to teach. We were deeply moved, and took the seals, carefully placing them in our bags in a

place where they could not be cracked or damaged. Sifu told us that the practice was canceled. He told us to remember that sometimes we had to celebrate, as well as train. We had tea, and after a while some of Sifu's friends arrived. We all cooked food, and had a party, drinking Chinese wine, laughing and joking well into the night. The next morning, amid many tears and promises of future reunions, we caught a taxi to the hovercraft docks. From there we started down the Pearl River on the long voyage back to Japan and after that, into the world of our future.

## **Chapter 5: Canada 1997: Returning to the Once Known Land**

I am driving down the highway. A year before I had been with Sifu, and the sights and smells of Guangzhou were everywhere. Now they are part of another world. Here, in Canada, I am drowning in wealth. The highway is an endless stream of gleaming, expensive cars. Green mini vans glide past me, driven by middle-aged couples and their teenage children, well-fed, well-clothed, assured in their way of life. After living in Guangzhou, I cannot see poverty. Everyone seems fabulously rich, and everything seems beautiful. The scenery is green, manicured, and plush. After the grey of downtown Tokyo and the broken buildings of China, it seems incredibly beautiful. I am in beauty shock. Even the road signs are clean, the small parks well tended and taken care of, the welcoming signs for each community surrounded by neat flower beds, pansies spelling out the names of towns and waving in the breeze, marigolds alternating with daisies in plush green displays. The lawns are like carpets, and the houses, with their sundecks and neatly painted exteriors, look like photographs in magazines.

It is a paradise, but one in which I am not doing well. Awash in all this opulence, I am dislocated and torn. I miss Asia and Sifu. I miss speaking Japanese, but most of all, I miss the feeling of being fully and deeply alive, of travelling to foreign countries, of studying Hsing I and Tai Chi, of learning rare martial arts. We live in a small basement apartment in a town called Chemainus. Compared to the pollution and crowding of Kawasaki or Bangkok, it is a surreal dreamland, yet people here are no more happy than

they were in China. If I drive too slowly, impatient motorists honk at me. The more violent ones give me the finger, shake their fists, or tailgate me. I can see their contorted faces, swearing violently because they are enraged that I am going too slowly for them. Such direct confrontation would be unimaginable in Japan, and since I have lived so long away, it is terribly difficult for me.

The most important thing for everyone seems to be mutual funds and RRSPs. How much do you have? Do you have as much as me? I am with this financial group. Which one are you with? It is all about the sundeck they have or the vehicle, television, or computer. They seem obsessed with retirement. Only fifteen years left. They live for the time when all of this will be over, and they will be able to golf all day. When the kids are gone and they can spend their time in well-deserved luxury. I am unable to understand it.

In this society of home ownership, I am renting. In this world of funds, I am fundless. In this place of golf and beers and buddies, I have never stepped onto a green and don't drink. The NHL is meaningless to me, and I don't understand Seinfeld. People talk about it, and I nod politely. The dislocation is terrible because it is occurring in *my* culture, where I was supposed to return and, regain my old self, but now that self is gone. Who am I? Here, where I am being torn apart, who am I? I did not completely assimilate in Asia, and I cannot regain my native culture.

I am once again a high school teacher. Five months after returning to Canada, I found a job teaching Japanese in a small town on Vancouver Island. I am grateful for the opportunity for a new life but know that something is wrong. The adjustment to Canadian life is too difficult. I wear a tie each day, the only teacher in my school to do so.

To my students and colleagues I am distant and enigmatic. I seldom go to the staff room to socialize. Everyone there seems loud and opinionated, people who have been to Japan for six weeks talk about it as though they had been there for a lifetime. They explain Japanese customs to me. They are the authority. I should listen.

I react as a Japanese would. What is wrong with them, I say? Why do they dress so badly? Why do they talk so much? How can they be so opinionated? Don't they know that to express one's opinion so strongly is rude? How can they presume to tell me about the people with whom I have lived for eight years when they were there for a few weeks? Don't they know this is inappropriate and wrong? My students are incredibly rude. They refuse to do their daily assignments, neglect their homework, and have to be ejected from class. They have no work ethic and don't seem to care about their education. Each teaching day is a struggle. Each day I return, and it is an effort. What is wrong with them? What is wrong with them?

There is nothing wrong with them. They are being themselves, normal Canadian teachers and students. I am the one who is inappropriate. I am the one who does not fit. This is not Ginza or Omotesando. There are no gleaming coffee shops here. I can see that this is the world where I grew up in, that it is like the Canada I knew, but that I am different. I am going through return shock. Every day I want to go back to Asia and at the same time return to my pre-Asia self. After the first six months, I begin to feel that I am falling behind. In Asia the important things were experiences. Now the important thing seems to be possessions. After a year, I start to acquire them. Jocelyn and I buy a house.

We purchase lawnmowers, patio furniture, appliances, new vehicles, new clothes, a new world with new attitudes. But deep inside there is the torn fabric of my divided heart.

Each month grappling with this division becomes more and more tortuous. Confrontations with students escalate. I am told that I demand too much, have unrealistic expectations, am a slave driver, and think I am still in Japan. Adjusting to Canadian students and the Western way does not come easily. I succeed in repairing a Japanese program that had been left in chaos. I make a difference, but it is gradual and painful. To reduce that pain, I practice the martial arts. In my spare time I found a community tai chi club and start a kung fu club at my school. In this way I try to touch the traditions of my teachers. It is a way to hang on to a thread of contact with the world I once knew, a thread that grows more frayed each day.

It is like sleepwalking through a dream. So much is familiar, yet everything seems foreign. This is the land of my childhood and youth, but now it is a land of strangers, of misplaced assumptions, and distorted memories. I walk the streets I walked as a teenager, look on the faces of people who once seemed familiar, and I long for the sights and sounds of Asia. I love the beauty of this place, but at the same time I feel its emptiness, so far from the streets of Tokyo and the back alleys of Guangzhou. There is a space in me, summoned into being by the terrible pull of two worlds and two ways of being. For a time, I wish I had never gone to Asia. I try to regain the self who knew nothing of another world, only the illusions of a mythical land. I wish those illusions had not been disturbed, and I wonder where my original self has gone. I want to regain it but, at the same time, know that I cannot.

Many more years will go by before I can hope to come to terms with these feelings. I have lived two lives, a life within a life, and I have been privy to a world unseen by those around me. I have inherited my father's experiences and been woven into the tapestry of his life. I have embraced his battlefield pain and the terrible, disrupting, rending dislocation of that experience. The man I have become is made up of all of this. Now that I have returned, I must try to understand what has gone before. Who was I then, eleven years ago, when the smells and sights of Japan were unknown? Who was I seven years ago, before I had experienced all these ways of being, before I knew what it was like to walk down the back streets of Guangzhou, travel to countries I had not seen, and question the values I grew up with? Where am I? The "I" once taken for granted, the "me" I thought I knew so well? I will try to regain myself, to unmake the changes that have occurred. That "me" seems so much more real. The life I lived in Asia seems an aberration, an interruption that should not have been. I am living in Canada, I tell myself, I ought to be Canadian. I keep saying to myself that this is the real world, the world confirmed by those around me, a world made up of customs and beliefs that I want to regain.

But I cannot regain them, and I cannot regain myself. I have changed in ways that make the reclaiming of my past impossible. I cannot go back. As I build the trappings of a respectable North American life, I push myself farther and farther away from any hope of becoming part of it. That is the great irony. As I acquire more, and conform to what is considered acceptable, I only manage to paint, in brighter and more vibrant hues, the

colours of my difference. With each goal achieved, the memory of Asia grows brighter. And with each attempt to fit in, my lost self falls farther away.

One day, In the summer of 1997, months after I have returned, I write a letter to Sifu. It is full of memories of our time together. Sitting at my desk, I am overcome with emotion. I realize that my pre-Asian self has no chance of returning and that living in Asia is a part of me that will not go away, that it cannot be “repaired.” My old self has gone. A new one exists and is a self that I must both accept and explore. Pausing for a moment, I try to collect myself. I open the drawer containing the poem Sifu wrote. My former self is like a footprint in the snow, an imprint of what once was, a memory, and a promise. Like the markings of the snow cranes, it may one day return, but for now, like their melting footprints, it is gone.

## Chapter 6: In the Kwoon of the Human Heart

*Victoria, 1998*

Rain lashed the windshield of my car. Ahead of me the road wound tortuously, looping back on itself, rising and dipping as it made its way along the darkened Vancouver Island coast. Half an hour earlier I had stopped at a gas station for a coffee, one cup of Irish Cream, enough to keep me alert on the long drive to Victoria. Even in the dark I knew the way. This was the road of my youth, winding its way through familiar territory. It was October, and the rain was relentless, coming down so heavily that the windshield wipers had difficulty keeping up. I remembered it from other autumns, felt it in my chest and gut, knew it like the texture of an old sweater. It was mine, from my world, the remembered world of my pre-Asia self, the one I was trying to regain.

It clung to the surface of my coat and streamed over the surface of the car. Inside, in the sheltered over-warmth of the car's engine, with the radio on and the smell of coffee infusing the air, I felt a sense of deep comfort. Time had passed since I had left the Hong Kong Dong and the world of Sifu's teachings. Time had passed since I had experienced the shock and disorientation of my first few months in Canada. It had been a year and a half since all of that, and the road outside my car was now part of the land I lived in. I was becoming accustomed to the North American world. Each day I recalled the look and smell of something from distant memory: the sea air, the smell of a Western home, the deep greens of the West Coast rain forest, moss on rock, bark peeling off an arbutus tree, and once again, as in my youth, the smell of wet cedar.

I crested the high point of the Malahat, descended toward Goldstream Park, and took yet another sip of coffee. That was the rhythm of the drive: the CBC, coffee, my thoughts, and the rain. It usually took me about forty-five minutes to drive from my high school to Victoria. In the dark womb of the winter drive, I mulled over the triumphs and setbacks of the life I had returned to. I still did not feel as though I belonged. I often missed Sifu, Asia, and my kung fu brothers and sisters and felt a deep sense of loss at their absence. I still wrote to Sifu, Derek, and May, who wrote back, though not as often as they had in the first few months. Each day Western associations intruded on the world of my Asian life and made it more distant. Sometimes it would be a meal I had enjoyed from pre-Asia days, or the childhood memory of the smell of new rain on dusty pavement, or some other memory that warred with my need to preserve my Asian self.

My car was new, a bright and shiny Saturn, and it responded beautifully on the rain-soaked road. I could see the dark outlines of the trees ahead of me as the highway narrowed towards Goldstream. I shifted down as the traffic merged. It had become natural this, driving, shifting, moving with the car, as though it were an extension of me, part of me in the car-centered world of the West. I switched the radio off and concentrated on the road ahead. Motorists jockeyed for position as four lanes narrowed to two. I thought fleetingly of my years on public trains in Tokyo, of riding battered bicycles, of walks with Sifu through the back streets of Guangzhou. How different this was, how plush.

Memories of battered red thermoses were fading. I reached down for my Starbucks coffee container. Plush. This was the world of my pre-Asia self. I was grateful for it, but at the same time despised the shiny texture of it. Even as I reveled in it, I could

not escape a nagging feeling that it was superficial. I would not have chosen to go back to China, time had already distanced me from that, but I would have loved to have the chance to practice in the Hung Mong Dong again or to have heard Yuk Hoi's laughter.

I cut over to the inside lane and hugged the median. I needed to stay there in order to catch the turnoff to Mackenzie Avenue and the University of Victoria. I was a graduate student now, and, as I slowed down and joined the stream of traffic funneling into the turnoff, I thought about how much I enjoyed it. Others went begrudgingly from their teaching jobs back to graduate school, hating the classes and reminding themselves that they were necessary evils, something they had to endure so that they could go up a step on their pay grid. I felt differently. So far graduate school had been difficult but satisfying, and I had done well. I looked forward to my classes, and a whole new world of academics and postmodern thinking had opened up to me. The challenge of it had been invigorating. It had reminded me of practicing the Sword of the Dragon Pool form, only without the excruciating physical pain.

Until this course. I steered the car over to the right, then gently merged into the lane that would take me to the university parking lot. As I nudged my way in, I thought about how different this course had been. The professor was different; the class expectations were different; even the title of the course was different: "Writing as Research." My previous courses had been challenging, but this one felt strange. Daniel Scott, like Sifu, was a good-natured, pleasant, and erudite teacher but approached things from a perspective very different from my own. Already I had found myself asking again and again, what did he mean by that? What the hell did he mean by that?

I found a spot as close to the education building as I could get, stepped out into the rain, then walked around to the trunk of my car and pulled out my bag. I slung it over my right shoulder and started across campus to the back entrance of the MacLaurin building. This was a year-long course, so I could expect to come this way many times. I brought my coat up against the rain, shielding myself and at the same time thinking of how much I wanted another kind of shield against the terrible unpredictability of the course. Already I was beginning to fear it, and the fear was growing. I had learned in the Hung Mong Dong to embrace softness and try to minimize the fear of new ways of looking at life, but this was different. Here there were no physical moves that I could master by changing my pattern of movement this way or that. This course involved the unknown, the dark void of a whole new way of looking at life. What would be in that empty dark space?

My coffee cup was drained so I threw it in a nearby garbage can. There were only a few meters left to the building entrance. I walked quickly through the doors, readjusted the strap of my bag, and headed into the warmth of the building. There was a Tim Horton's on the way to class. I stopped there and picked up another coffee. I felt that I could use it. Ever since Tokyo with its sumptuous coffee shops, I had equated a cup of coffee with calmness and steady thinking. If this class was like the other two I had gone to, I would need to think a lot and search myself as I never had before. In the past I had sometimes experienced a peculiar feeling. I had felt it with Sifu Chen in Tokyo and later before sparring with Sifu Chow in the park in Guangzhou. It was a kind of instinctual feeling. Years of martial arts training had strengthened it. When something dangerous or

life-transforming was about to happen, I could sense it. That night, as I turned the corner to enter Daniel's class, I felt it again.

This was the night when he was going to hand back our first assignment. I was terrified. Something told me that I had missed the mark, and that I was about to go through the same kind of trial I had endured with Sifu in Guangzhou. My graduate school career was changing. After an already challenging beginning, the learning curve was steepening. Like climbing the mountain of basics in kung fu, graduate school was becoming more frightening and demanding. It was beginning to parallel my martial arts experience, my life in the Wu Lin, and now I was being asked to do jong, to go through the agony of enduring long periods when all that stood between me and falling down was my determination, my will to hold on. I could feel it.

I chose a seat at the corner of a table near a couple of friends and waited. That night Daniel introduced us to Serres and his work *Rome: The Book of Foundations*. I tried to pay attention to what he was saying, but my mind was on my paper. I could feel my heartbeat rising, and began to practice the chi kung breathing, willing myself into calmness. My mind drifted back to the Hung Mong Dong.

I had learned a great deal on the floor of that kwoon. Through sparring against Sifu, and in the endless repetition of techniques, forms, and weapons practice, I had been stripped bare and humbled. My identity as a Westerner and as a human being had been called into question, and I had been forced to look at myself again and again. Whether willing myself to hold on during a session of grueling jong practice, or combating the rising terror of fighting Sifu, there had been no easy way out.

As a Wu Lin practitioner, a member of the martial world, I knew that being a graduate student would involve the same kind of difficulties I had known as a warrior. It involved real growth, and this was almost always painful. That night I knew that I was entering a new and unknown land, and, just as I had initially not known what it would be like to live in China or Japan, I was still not sure of the shape of this new place of post-graduate studies. Several of my classmates commented on Daniel's presentation. I had very little to say and waited quietly until the end of class. When it was over, Daniel asked me to wait for a few minutes because he needed to discuss my paper with me.

I felt as though the ground had shifted out from under me. What the hell was going on? I had tried my best to complete the assignment. Why did he want me to stay behind? The feeling was back. Suddenly I was in Guangzhou watching Sifu inch toward me, watching that iron arm preparing to crash through my defences. Terror, absolute terror. I had to control it. My instincts had been right: something was wrong. In some way I did not yet know I had not understood the assignment, and had not done well. But what was it that I did not know? What lesson, like the ones I had learned in China, did I need to know here?

I waited patiently near the head of the table while Daniel spoke to another student. When he finished, he turned to me and took my paper in both of his hands. There was a second of silence while he shut his eyes. With a sigh he told me that I had no voice and that he could not hear me in the paper. For a brief instant I was a boy in grade seven receiving a failing mark in mathematics. I felt the sheer terror of not knowing what was happening. All of my academic training had emphasized objectivity and rigour. I had

been trained to write in the third person, to look at things dispassionately, and to maintain a certain degree of distance. I had been taught that distance equaled credibility. Now I was being asked to find my voice and “use” it. It was frightening. What was this thing called “voice” anyway? I felt as though I was falling and that there was nothing to slow me and no place to land.

We talked for forty minutes. As time passed I began to feel more comfortable, but the idea that I would be permitted to speak in a personal voice in the academy felt uncomfortable and disorienting. This new land of narrative and storytelling was a strange one, and I was not sure that I liked it. On the first night of the course, Daniel told us that one of the requirements would be a long-term writing project and that we would have to present it to the class. I had no idea what I would write about. I told him that I felt inadequate and confused and that I had somehow failed. He assured me that this wasn't the case and that my feelings were part of a process I would eventually come to terms with. I accepted his statement on faith, but there was much that I could not yet see, and it was disconcerting. I could not bring myself to tell him that I didn't really understand most of what he had said to me.

At the end of our talk, I pushed back my chair and thanked him. I had felt his concern, and felt closer to him, but I was still angry and frustrated. Outside I could see the rain coming down. It was dark, and the drive up island would be long and difficult. What was being asked of me was so alien that I did not even know where to begin. I could only hope that I could imitate the correct response, and that my guess would come close to hitting the mark. It was like my experience with Jocelyn in the kwoon. I was being told to

relax, to embrace a softer, more flexible approach to academics. But the truth was that I was not sure what that meant or even if I could do it. With each passing moment I grew angrier and angrier.

As I left the building, I cursed into the darkness. What the hell was this? Wasn't this supposed to be academics? What was the point in just telling a story? Who cared about my voice anyway, and what did it have to with a graduate level course? I couldn't understand any of it. While other students were quoting this and that, sounding academic and being rewarded for it, I was being told that I had to find my voice and loosen up. It wasn't fair.

I stepped out into the pelting rain and felt as though I was falling into an abyss. This was horrible, worse than my trials in the Hung Mong Dong. At least there I had had a reference point. I had known that I was doing martial arts and that if I endured, and trained hard, I would probably be able to adapt. But here I did not even know what I was doing or what the subject matter was. In some ways it felt even worse than that. I actually felt that I might be going into a trap. It felt like a trick, as though the rules had been changed and some malevolent deity was *looking* on and enjoying my pain. I pulled my collar up, tucking my scarf in tightly against the wind and rain, cursed again and started out across the parking lot. My suspicions had been right. This would not be easy, and I was most definitely in a fight. In the dojo or in the kwoon there had been no half measures. Once battle had been joined, it was me or them, and now I felt that way again. The only difference was that I did not know my opponent and had no idea what the

ground rules were. Make no mistake though, this was battle, and I was once again a warrior.

### *Sipping Tea in Remembrance*

A few weeks later I arrived at the university by a long route after visiting a friend in Saanich. We had gone to classes together as undergraduates in the 1970s, and had run together as young men in the fields and trails nearby. I was on my way to another of Daniel's classes, but decided to take some time out and stop at the university cafeteria. Outside it was dark, and a layer of mist and fog covered everything. I thought that having a cup of tea would be a good idea. It would give me a chance to look over my notes and study. I had a reasonable amount of time before my class, about forty five minutes. After looking briefly at the display cases outside the cafeteria entrance, I stepped inside and found a table. There were only a few other students, and we were separated by dozens of tables. For the most part I was alone.

I put my bag down, walked over to the food section, and bought a cup of tea. After sitting down, I opened my bag, took out some of my readings and lay them on the table in front of me, then I separated each one, and prepared to read them. There were five in all. I had read some of them in previous courses, so they were not entirely unfamiliar to me, and those I had not read I knew of. They were all major writings by authorities in autobiographical narrative. I propped one leg up on a chair and surveyed them. In a way looking at them was like selecting one of the five major weapons of kung fu and deciding which one to practice with. Like the weapons, they all had different qualities.

I took a drink from my cup and picked up the first article. Since the interview with Daniel I had had a lot of time to think. The subject of the legitimacy of narrative in the academy was now becoming an important issue for me. I was caught between my traditional orientation and this new way of looking at research and the role of academics. I was prepared to work in the comparatively new field of narrative inquiry, but before I did so, I needed to frame it in my own experience and history. I put down the article and took another drink of tea, feeling the warmth drain into my body. Who had I previously been? Where had I stood as a scholar? I remembered runs with my friends past the windows of this very building twenty years previously. In those days I had been committed to the traditional academic way. I had not looked at other ways of researching. In my mind the hardness of the traditional academy had been truth itself. Papers followed a certain form, authorities were cited, footnotes included, the structure of the paper developed paragraph by paragraph to a definable conclusion. The forms were obeyed. I had written many such papers in History and English, and each had been similar to the others. As the years went by, I had grown better at constructing them, until eventually, given almost any topic, I could create a paper that was reasonably well-crafted.

I grew to admire the academy and enjoyed the traditional approach to academics. In my mind, academic distance, as expressed in the third person voice of the academy and the hard evidence of cited research, represented legitimacy. The academic structure took hold of me and, as time went by, it took on the quality of sacrosanct truth. Ironically, I was at the same time the sensei of my university's karate club. The two mirrored each other. The hard way of karate-do matched the hard approach of academic research. In the

dojo there was conformity and obedience to authority. I loved them both, and, like the staccato rhythm of the karate forms and the sheen of the hardwood floor, the distance and discipline of the academy seemed like an inviolable canon : an unassailable bastion of truth and legitimacy.

But since I had begun graduate studies, both the canon and the traditional academic construct were being challenged. I was beginning to question the nature of academics and the tradition of academic practice that I had once unquestionably accepted. Karate contained a certain rigidity and implied violence. In a way, so did traditional academics. I had found a kind of liberation in kung fu practice because of its expansive nature and wider curriculum, one that included the whole individual: health, medicine, weaponry, meditation, and a softer, more flexible way of looking at myself and the world around me. This had been even more true of Tai Chi, where softness and flow had been the essence of the art . There was no violence to the individual, and because of this, chi flowed. I asked myself if this might not also be true of the new kind of research I was entering. Could this softer approach to academics, which included autobiographical narrative and which honoured the lifeworld of the individual, be analogous to Tai Chi?

I took another sip of tea and leaned back in my chair. Running my hands over my face, I considered the place of the traditional academy in my life. I was still attached to it and a strong admirer of its rigour, and I knew that that rigour should not be abandoned. Though kung fu practice emphasized flow, it was still necessary to do the hard practice of basics and jong. That was the foundation. This had also been true of Tai Chi and the demanding forms practice and chi cultivation that gave it its tremendous power. Rigour

was a necessary part of academics. But the traditional way did violence to the individual and to the possibility of alternative approaches to thought and research. For one thing, it objectified the individual researcher and separated his or her lifeworld and experiences from the research. It rejected the personal and devalued the alternative. It limited expression and allowed only a narrow band of academic legitimacy.

I paused and put down my cup. I wondered what this meant for me, embarking on my first tentative steps in narrative inquiry. I was not yet entirely convinced of its legitimacy. Telling stories hadn't been research to me two decades before, and I could still feel my resistance to it. It reminded me of my feelings towards the Chinese martial arts fifteen years earlier. It is always difficult to embrace a new path, to reach out to a different, more open perspective. How would I come to terms with this new openness, and what would be its implications for me as an individual and a scholar? I knew that I would probably come to an answer through trusting my instincts and by remaining open, but I also suspected that the answer would be tied to the research contained in the articles in front of me. Hard and soft, traditional research and narrative, the balance of these elements would be extremely important. I sensed that my experiences had value in the academy and that by using autobiographical narrative, I could tie them to my work. That was the softness that resembled Tai Chi. But they also needed to be connected to research and to have an academic reference point so that the stories I told would not become simple naive or self indulgent tales. That was the hardness that resembled karate. Hardness and softness, research and experience, all in a balanced flow.

I looked at the articles and took a deep breath. I had not yet selected my writing project. What I would write about depended on how I could balance the elements of my life and the research in front of me. I was still unsure about what was expected of me and even about what the topic of the research was supposed to be. I had to plunge over the edge in order to find out. I picked up the first article. It was by Madelaine Grumet, a famous educational scholar, and dealt with the legitimacy of daily experiences in the academy. I liked the title: “Curriculum and the Art of Daily Living.” It implied a melding of life and the academy, experience and research. I took another sip of tea and started to read. After a few minutes, I came across a sentence that made me stop and think: “The choosing and naming of what matters and the presentation of those values for the perception and engaged participation of others are the deliberations that constitute curriculum development” ( Grumet, 1991, p.2). Ah . . . then there was a process of choosing what mattered, not necessarily an imposed canon, and those deliberations constituted the curriculum. Curriculum was a wider concept. I read on. Later on the same page she wrote:

This collection of things, like the curriculum of great books, or the canon, achieved value because it was intertwined with the daily passions, struggles, and the attainments of the people we care about. The ordering of daily life requires the aesthetic processes of symbolization, reinterpretation. The processes constitute the art and craft of curriculum as well (Grumet, 1991, p.2 )

I stopped and put down the paper. I had to think about what this meant. The ordinary struggles, passions, and attainments of people mattered? There was reinterpretation, symbolization and the valuing of the individual's life? This was different from the traditional academic canon that I had held so dear. I was intrigued, but also a little afraid. The territory I was stepping into was going to be different. If daily experiences mattered and story telling mattered, where were the boundaries? If all of these could be considered legitimate, what happened to the rigour of the traditional academy, and how would I balance those two things? I read on, going from article to article looking for one point of connection after another, searching for a way to connect the new perspective of personal narrative to the old one of traditional academics, seeking a way to value the soft nature of the personal but at the same time honour the harder approach of the traditional academy.

In an article by Carola Conle ( Conle, 1999) I read her description of research using autobiography: "The student-teacher's/inquirer's personal history is not only openly addressed during the inquiry, but is taken as legitimate ground from which to proceed, as well as the medium through which theory and life are connected." (Conle, 1999,p.12) So there could be a connection between life and theory! Others had found it to be so. In a later article by the same author I found yet another quote that made me stop, put down my tea, and reflect. "Doing narrative inquiry has meant surrounding ourselves with the stories of our current and past learning experiences . . . we found a new way of being in the academy." (Conle,1999, p. 13)What did this mean for the traditional academy, and more importantly, what did this mean for me? Did it mean that the stories

about my past life, and what I was learning now were a legitimate form of research? If life and theory could intersect, did it mean that there was now more than one way to be “academic?” As I sat there with the rapidly cooling teacup in my hand I thought about what this meant. Everything pointed to the likelihood that despite the tremendous resistance I felt toward it, and my continued attachment to traditional academics, I was being drawn into this new world of narrative inquiry, and even though I did not yet have a writing topic, I might still become part of it, align myself with it, and move into a new world with which I was as yet unfamiliar.

That was a very strange feeling. I asked myself what I was getting into and what kind of journey I was taking. Clearly this was some kind of journey from hard to soft. In terms of academics, I had to become softer—more open, more willing to risk change and to express myself in new forms—to go from hard rigid ideas and assumptions about learning and the academy, to being soft, opening to more flexible and open approaches both in and out of traditional academic structure. It paralleled my martial arts journey in Asia. If the traditional academic world I had known as a youth was karate, this new world was Tai Chi, open, flowing, soft, and powerful in its implications. I needed another cup of tea.

Outside I could see that the fog had changed to a rainy drizzle. In the dark windows of the cafeteria I could see my reflection. I looked drawn and tired. The long drive down had been taxing, and the self-reflection was tiring. I got up, bought another cup of tea, and returned to my table. I was the only one left in the cafeteria, and as I stood next to my chair, I looked down at the five articles. There were two by Conle, two

by Grumet, and one by William Pinar. I couldn't help being reminded of the weapons rack in Sifu's kwoon in Guangzhou. They were powerful, just like those weapons. You picked one up at your own risk, never knowing what you would find out about yourself once you began wielding them.

I still did not understand the boundary between theory and life experience, and so I began to read again. In the same article by Conle I found a quote that read: "All inquiry reaches into life, life advances theory, and theory shapes life," (Conle, 1999, p.13) and again, "The lines between life, work, and research are becoming more and more perforated." (Conle, 1999, p.13) Was it possible that the boundaries between theory and life experiences were not inviolate, that, while balancing it with some degree of theory, my life narrative, or parts of it, were an acceptable research topic, even that I might legitimately be the site of my own research? At this point I had to stop. It was a lot to grasp. I took a moment and sat back. The five articles were not the only ones on my reading list, not even the only ones I had read on the topic of writing as research, but they were powerful. I had to grasp their importance, and my gut told me that I would need to understand deeply the struggle between traditional and non-traditional academics that lay ahead of me.

I knew that this would involve great difficulty and risk, and, as if to confirm this, I read in Conle that "There is struggle implied in this new path, leading from the 'old self' to a new narratively contextualized self." ( Conle, 1999, p. 13 ) I took another sip of tea and thought about it. The element of struggle was clear. But what would I learn about myself in this new journey and what risks were involved? It was already becoming

obvious that I was going to experience a form of re-orientation based on the movement from hard to soft, and involving the risk of new approaches and new modes of expression. But there was also another question of identity that I would have to take up, and it would involve unpacking what I learned about myself in the course of writing about my life. First things first. I would deal with narrative, then worry about the issues of image and identity.

As I drank the last of my tea, I picked up the first article by Grumet and read about the risks involved in autobiographical narrative. She had written about storytelling, saying, “with every telling we stop the flood and swirl of thought so someone can get a glimpse of us.” (Grumet, 1987, p.322 ) This implied risk. I would be exposing myself to others and to my own scrutiny. Was I ready for that? I thought for a moment. Certainly vulnerability would be part of pursuing the autobiographical path. I couldn’t see how it could be avoided. As Grumet had said, others would get a glimpse of me, perhaps see things I did not want them to see. That was part of the inherent risk of storytelling.

Suddenly my heart beat faster. Did I really want to do this? It would be much safer to stick to the traditional approach. I felt an overwhelming desire to retreat to the warmth and safety of the academics of my youth, of the impersonal third-person history papers I had churned out two decades earlier. But if I drew back it was unlikely that I would learn much about the course material or myself. Vulnerability implied terrible risk, but it was also the price for growth. I had an opportunity to grow, to do valuable personal and academic work, and to learn about myself and the process of adjustment and identity struggle I had gone through in the preceding six years, perhaps even throughout

my entire life. If I could accept that as a legitimate form of academics I had the potential for tremendous growth.

As if on cue I looked down at Conle's paper in front of me and read: "The story of my life in autobiographical accounts can serve to make a sense of my life that I had not been aware of before." (Conle, 1999, p. 15) What lay ahead of me? There was one more paper in front of me that I had not examined. It was William Pinar's "The Method of Currere." I had glanced at it once before. Now I settled down into my chair and began to read it in earnest. It was a short piece, and I felt I could read it before class began. In it he described his method, which I had already read about in one of Grumet's articles: "...an approach to educational autobiography entailing a triple telling as reflection was sorted into past experience, present situation and future images." (Grumet, 1987, p.324) I thought of my past, my upbringing, and my experiences in Asia. If I followed the tradition of narrative inquiry represented by the articles in front of me, would those past experiences have legitimacy in my work and perhaps even become the basis of my future research? In the article Pinar wrote: "To ascertain where one is, when one is, one must locate the past." (Pinar, 1975, p. 4 ) It was an important statement. Perhaps my research had to do with locating myself, and if it did it would inevitably involve an examination of my past.

I looked at my watch and sat up. There were only a few minutes left before Daniel's class. I had become completely unaware of the time. I packed up the articles, picked up my bag, and walked out the door making my way across the campus with a new sense of awareness.

*The Hall of the Twin Dragons*

A few days later I stepped into the old church I used as a training hall intending to practice my forms and do some stretching exercises, the ones Sifu had shown us in China. Sunlight streamed in through the windows and landed on the hardwood floor of the hall. I had about fifteen minutes before my kung fu class began and, following that, a class in Tai Chi. Once again I was a martial arts teacher, but now, instead of being a sensei, I was a sifu. The technique was different, but the feeling of being an instructor was the same. The imparting of knowledge, the sense of carrying on a lineage, the preservation of a tradition, and the teaching of movement remained unaltered. Now, though, I asked my students to “flow like water” and not to “focus”. I told them to relax and open their bodies rather than grip the floor, and I tried to help them generate “chi” rather than turn their bodies into iron. I wore the traditional black silk uniform of a sifu rather than the white cotton one of a sensei.

The first class was young, high school boys and girls who had joined my public club. They always came in boisterously, full of energy, eager to start the high kicks and spectacular moves of kung fu. I tucked my tee shirt into my silk pants and tied my black sash around it signifying, to myself, and them, that I was teaching kung fu and not tai chi. An hour later I would pull it out again and wear it over my pants, indicating the change to a softer art. Once again it was the transition from hard to soft, a symbol for the personal transformation had undergone in Asia, and the journey I was undergoing in academics. We would start this class with Sifu’s Hung Gar chi kung, then move to

exercises, floor techniques, sparring, and finally individual practice. It was the rhythm of training I had practiced since boyhood.

I had started this small kung fu and tai chi club one year before as a way to honour Sifu and to carry on his traditions. The two seals he gave us were in a place of honour in our home, awaiting our students' certificates, should they progress far enough to merit them. The club was small and intimate, like my kung fu family, and I was determined to keep it that way. I had no time or desire to turn it into a major commercial enterprise. Somehow something was lost when you did that. My students were loyal and hardworking, and that was already more than I could have asked for.

I had decided to name the school Twin Dragons Kung fu, Tai Chi Institute. It had to have a name, and because this was not China, where the location or name of the school would not have mattered, and where you may not even have been able to find it without being accepted into the inner circle, I had adapted to the North American way. Adapted, but not sold out. The core of Sifu's teachings were identical, honouring him and all of the other great masters I had studied under. The name Twin Dragons referred to Sifu Chen and Chow Kai Lung. They were the great teachers who had given Jocelyn and I so much and had transmuted my martial prowess from steel to silk, from hard to soft, and beyond that from raw power to flexibility.

I began my stretching with an ancient Taoist flexibility sequence, the Marrow Washing Classic, each part of the exercise flowing into the next: Scholar Opening the Scroll, Young Lad Worshipping the Buddha, Extend the Waist to View the Moon, Swallow Returning to Nest, General Taking off His Boots, Monkey Lifts the Cauldron. A

slight sweat began to form as each movement stretched a muscle group or opened an energy meridian. When my students arrived, I would be ready for the class. I thought about the meaning of the kung fu salute, left hand open clasping the closed fist of the right, left of the scholar, right of the warrior, cultivation enclosing strength and power, civilization controlling barbarity, the mind controlling the body. We began each class with the salute, and each time I reminded my students of its meaning. We had to become complete people, the left hand of the scholar united with the right hand of the warrior. Here, in this little church, with a small group of people, I carried on Sifu's way and honoured my kung fu ancestors.

As I worked my body and struggled with its knotted tenseness, I tried to come to terms with Daniel's class. The struggle was the same: get soft, find a way to truth. My right foot arched high and slapped my right hand as I completed a crescent kick. What had Daniel meant about voice? What would I do for my writing project? As the knots worked out of my body, I tried to work the knots out of my graduate studies. I dipped low, imitating a monkey as it lifted a large vessel. I felt my inner thigh muscles loosen, then slithered down like a snake quizzically turning my neck with darting eye movements like the Monkey King. I was beginning to enjoy this. A sheen of sweat began to form, I looped my arms in circles like a scholar opening large rice paper scrolls of Chinese characters and then began the sequence again.

What did I need to know? How did my time in Asia and the events of my life play into all of this? What was the voice Daniel had spoken of? What issues of self did I need to investigate? Why did all of it make me feel so angry and threatened? What was I

holding on to that I should let go of? Crack!! My left foot lashed out hitting my left hand, then my right; down and stomp with the right foot, and then up with the edge of the left in a tiger tail kick behind me. Sweep left leg in iron broom, sweep right after it. What did I need to know? What did I need to know? I came up to clasp my hands together like a young acolyte in the courtyard of a temple.

Breathing deeply, now limber and ready to start my standing technique practice, I came up from my low stance and suddenly knew what my writing project would be. I would write about this, about all of this, about karate and kung fu, about my teachers, about hawks circling in the sky over Enoshima, about horse stances and incense, about training halls and the the back streets of Guangzhou, about the terror of not knowing and the exhilaration of realization. I would write about my journey of realization, the process of learning I had gone through then, and that I was continuing to go through even now. I would write about my search for identity and, by doing so, commit myself to a new perspective on the academy. I would take up the process of going from hard to soft in my life and in the academy and in that, deal with identity, the self I was trying to recover, and the self I was becoming.

*Nyumon: Entering at the First Gate*

*The Unlacing of Armour*

I had not learned the martial arts from a book. I had learned them on the practice floor. I had learned from repeating the moves again and again no matter how difficult they became, from the smell of the incense and the feel of hardwood on my feet, from trusting

my instincts and my teachers, from taking chances and practicing patience. In graduate school I would have to learn the same way. I would succeed in learning about myself only by trusting my instincts, and I would fail to the degree that I did not trust them. I needed to step beyond the confines of the academy but preserve rigour in the new autobiographical approach I was struggling to accept. That much was becoming apparent, but the question remained, would I be able to take a chance and honour those hidden parts of myself where wisdom resided?

In China I had been forced to unlearn everything I had taken for granted and throw it to one side. If I hadn't I would not have been able to learn a single move of kung fu, and would have remained forever a karateka, imitating a foreign art, stiffly pounding my way through moves that should have flowed. I was in a similar position now. I had to take a chance, open up to new definitions of what academics meant and become willing to try this new autobiographical approach.

On yet another rain-soaked night, I pulled my car into the parking lot at the university, grabbed my bag, and walked the path to Daniel's class, but now there was a difference. This time I was prepared to risk, to accept that there was a different direction I needed to go, and to fully commit myself to narrative, even if it was terrifying and alien, and my attachment to the traditional academy told me not to do so. Only with a bold movement, like the stroke of a broadsword, would I be able to move ahead.

I stopped at Tim Horton's and bought another coffee, then made my way to the classroom. As I walked through the halls with my coffee cup in hand, I thought about how familiar these corridors were and at the same time how alien. I had been an

undergraduate here, yet after all these years, they seemed curiously different. My heart beat as I made my way to a table and sat down in preparation for Daniel's lecture .

Many years before, when I was first learning kanji, the Chinese characters used in Japanese writing, I came across a beautiful two character combination; the first was made of two strokes and meant entering into something. The other was the ancient symbol for a gate. Together they formed the word "Nyumon," meaning an entry point, or the action of entering into something. This moment in Daniel's class resembled that character. I had to enter in at the gate, pass through to a new experience, and without knowing exactly what to expect, embark on a new beginning open to the possibility of narrative's legitimacy. The gateway loomed, and it presented the same terror of the unknown and the same personal challenge I had faced as a martial artist in Asia.

There was another parallel between my martial arts experience and my graduate school career as well. I would have to both shed and acquire. Each time I had learned something of significance, I had needed to unlearn something else. This time promised to be no different. As I waited for Daniel to begin I thought of the intricate knotted cords that held together the plates of a samurai's armour. Whatever armour of preconceived ideas I was wearing, I would have to shed it one plate at a time as I passed through each gateway of the journey. Each time I stepped through a gateway of realization I would be forced to loosen a cord and lose something, some cherished ideal about scholarship, academics, or my life. I was already beginning by challenging my attachment to the academy. If I were to learn new perspectives, I would have to discard old ones. Like a

samurai dropping to one knee to bind his wounds in the middle of battle, I would have to pause, lose some of my armour, bind the wounds of my discarded ideals, and move on.

In old Japanese temples, the kind I had been to in Kamakura and Kyoto, you enter through a series of gates. In large and famous ones like Heian Ji, or Todai Ji, you gain access by stepping over the threshold of each gate, then pass into the next area where you gain a new perspective by walking into a new courtyard or open-air pavilion. My graduate school education was beginning to resemble the structure of just such an ancient temple, and I suspected that I was about to pass through more gateways as I discovered more about the academy and myself.

That night a classmate gave a brilliant presentation about her struggle with her identity as an Indo-Canadian. It was enthralling, and for me it brought to mind many parallels about the struggle to belong and the tension between cultures. After she had finished and we had discussed her work, the class began to break up. My heart pounded as I stood up and walked over to Daniel. I sat down and asked him what he would think if I wrote a novel as my writing project. I had already sensed that it might be acceptable to suggest it, but wasn't sure how he would react. At the time it seemed almost insane. I liked to write, but it still did not seem like academics. The broadsword was in my hand, and a bold stroke needed to be taken. Earlier in the class, during the time given to reflective journal writing, I had written in Japanese: "Shimatta. Kore wa baka na koto da ne. Kowai da," which translated as "Damn it. This is a stupid thing to do. I am terrified," and indeed I was, but something compelled me to do it all the same. A story needed to be told, and a novel based on my life seemed appropriate.

Daniel smiled and said that he thought it was a great idea. I breathed a sigh of relief. Now I had a project. I would be able to go ahead, but the question remained: How would I do it? I had been given permission to write a novel and enter a new world of personal self-expression, but it felt strange and inappropriate. I did not fully understand why I, who had previously gave so much credence to the modernist canon, had chosen to do so. Somehow I felt that it had more to do with the kwoon than the academy, with the world of instinct and experience than universities and intellectual speculation. I suspected that the writing would shape itself in ways that I could not even imagine and challenge me in ways that I did not then even know. So why had I chosen it, and why did I feel such a compelling need to write it? I did not know.

*Entering at the Second Gate: Nibanme no Mon Ni Haieru*

*November 1998*

It began at my computer. *Snow Cranes* was born with coffee, in a cup I had bought in Kyoto. The cup took me back to my Asian life, and I hoped that the insights I might gain would propel me back beyond it to the life of my pre-Asian self. The day it began was another day of rain. This time, however, it was not in a car, but in the home Jocelyn and I had bought after returning from Tokyo. I lit three incense sticks to my teachers, the custom of all kung fu disciples, and began. I started in my youth, a day remembered, a day when I was fourteen and the East was a vibrant sacred image, when the Shaolin temple awaited me, and I thought I would one day wield a broadsword in a land of bamboo groves and misty temples. As I wrote, I could smell the sea and salt air,

feel my youth-inspired speed and strength, remember, as though it were in my hands at that very moment, my old copy of *What is Karate?*

At first there had been little hesitation. The writing had flowed effortlessly from me in a powerful remembrance of youth. Then it stopped. After a page and a half, I suddenly had nothing to say. Something was wrong. Somehow I felt it would have been inappropriate to continue, but why? I had intended to write a story of my martial arts career, and this was a good place to begin. Why had I stopped? I got up from my computer and paced around the room. Instinctively I went downstairs and began to go through the movements of the Tiger and Crane.

Here was a place I could feel safe. I had set up a small kwoon in our home, enough to train three or four people. The joss smell was familiar and comforting. By going through the movements I hoped that I would stir something in me that might spur the writing on. Nothing. Once again I felt angry and confused. Why was this so damned difficult? Just write the story I told myself. Just write it. Do the damned thing. But it was not that easy. I spent the rest of the afternoon walking in the woods near my house trying to break through the creative impasse. I went home and practiced Sifu's breathing drills, looked at treasured possessions and books and tried to remember—for there was something here that needed to be remembered—and went through the forms Sifu had taught us.

I had first sat down at the computer in the morning. Now, it was four o'clock in the afternoon, and I was no closer to continuing than when I began. My frustration began to build. I sat in front of the computer screen, bewildered and upset. Above me on the

wall were my martial arts certificates and photographs of Jocelyn and I in China. To the right were my books and family mementos. They were the artifacts of my life, and I looked to them for help: the books on martial excellence and strategy, the Japanese language texts, volumes on history, religion, and literature, my father's medals from the second world war. Suddenly I stopped. I had arranged for the medals to be framed a month after my return from Japan. Now the sun caught them and light glinted off the bright clasps and badges. My father had been so happy to receive them that he had stood at attention, his eighty-five year old body slowly straightening, and had saluted me in the old British manner. To the right of the medals were my samurai swords.

Suddenly I saw it. My martial arts life, symbolized by the swords, was connected to my father's life. I began to write, and I did not stop until afternoon had turned to night and night had faded into early morning. At two o'clock in the morning of the next day I stood up from the computer. There were dishes on my desk and remnants of food from meals Jocelyn had made while I worked. I brought them into the kitchen and for the first time started to think about sleep.

I had another story now, this one about my father. Why it had come into being I did not know, but I had felt compelled to write it. It had swept me away, and I had suddenly been with my father on the beaches of Normandy and in back alleyways in Edmonton. I had lived his world of combat, disorientation, and pain, and had felt him lose himself, fall out of his solid sense of being, and then try to find himself again. The story had revealed itself quickly, cascading from one naturally flowing episode to another. The combat scenes and tales of drifting from one job to another were not my experience, but

they were still part of me, part of my life. I had created them as fictional reconstructions, but they were also my father's life and in that way, true.

That night I knew I was creating something that I did not yet fully comprehend. It was as though there were no boundaries between my father's experiences and my own. My heart beat heavily as I lived his duel with the German veteran. I wept many times while writing of his pain, of the years of drinking and the painful disorientation I remembered seeing in his eyes when I was a small boy. His pain was mine, his confusion mine, and his horror at the unimaginable became my terror. Not until it was done, and I knew that my father's story was over, did mine begin.

*In the Courtyard of Trees*

A light snow fell on the trees above me. I could hear the hissing sound of wet flakes falling on the cedar branches. I stopped in the cold February air. Thrusting my hands into the pockets of my leather coat, I watched my breath steam into the air in front of me. The trail was enclosed, like a dark forest tunnel. The coat was my favourite, one I had bought while on vacation in London with Jocelyn. It was heavy, with brass clasps and long cuffs that could be rolled down over the wrists. The collar was high, and could be folded up to provide protection against the wind or elements. With my favourite scarf, a beautifully patterned one I had bought in Ginza, I felt protected. It took only a slight hunching of my shoulders to make me feel warm and start me thinking about *Snow Cranes* again.

As I stood on the trail, with large wet flakes of snow collecting on the boughs above me, and piercing the branch cover near me, I remembered my days in train stations, temples, and dojos, my time fighting for my life on hardwood floors and waiting to go home on crowded trains. There, on a wet trail, in a dark wood far from Asia, I considered how to proceed next. If I was going to tell a chronological story of my training, the logical place to start would be with the karate clubs I had founded in Northern B.C. That would make sense from the perspective of time. But it did not make sense in my heart.

I needed to tell a different tale, one that I could feel fully and that would help me to understand the complex feelings I had about my life in Asia. It needed to strike at the heart of what I had undergone, and deal with the issues of identity, change, and my attempt to recover my old pre-Asian self. But at the same time, it had to speak to something larger. Just my tale would not be enough, but failing to tell my tale would fall short. I began to walk up the tree-covered trail, thinking about my Asian experiences, going over the previous six and a half years and remembering: remembering all of the times I had fought for my sense of self in the same way I had fought for my life.

My father and I had so much in common. Struggling with internal and external enemies had become part of the fabric of our lives. We had both embarked on life-long odysseys, and those journeys had taken us on long creative sojourns, to rich places in which we had stumbled, fallen, and stood up again, pushing forward in our determination to come to grips with questions about ourselves and the issues that formed the pattern of our lives.

A sudden wind picked up the snow and blew it around me. It swirled in complex patterns as I emerged out of the forest and pulled up my collar. I stepped out onto the street and walked the last fifty yards to my home. Outside the door, I took off my scarf, brushed off the snow, and stepped inside. I hung up my coat and went back to my computer. I knew the kinds of stories I needed to write and was eager to begin.

*February 1999: The Search for Self*

During the next few weeks Daniel and I discussed the text many times. In repeated phone and e mail conversations, we peeled back the layers of meaning inherent in the work. Its depth surprised me. The themes began to slowly show themselves: my father's struggles with violence, the confusion accompanying human existence, the search for meaning and the quest for identity. They were there, like ghosts in my father's life, like reflections, mirrored in my own experiences. As I began to write about the events which were uniquely mine the themes changed, and the issues became my own.

I wrote for hours, taking breaks, stopping only when the tale had temporarily exhausted itself. I would go downstairs to my kwoon and practice, and between working as a high school teacher and teaching kung fu at Twin Dragons, I would write and remember. As I wrote I relived my experiences. Once again I fought in the Hoitsugan and walked the streets of Tokyo. Sometimes the writing would flow, and sometimes it would move so slowly that I would stare at the computer screen, get up, and walk away in frustration.

During the early stages of the writing I felt that something was missing. In some way the work's central theme had not shown itself. It needed to be teased out. I knew that there were probably many others which would appear in the course of writing. Each time I talked to Daniel I found out more. Often I could not see what was in the text by myself. The issues and themes only revealed themselves in the writing and, as in the case of my father's story, often took sudden turns, going in directions I never suspected, for reasons I could not fathom, only to reveal a theme I could only barely recognize later.

Each time a revelation occurred I would let go of a preconceived idea or cherished concept, and drop it, stepping through another gate into a new courtyard of perspective. It was like an immense puzzle with small boxes contained in larger ones, and each time I wrote, the process became more intense and convoluted.

Finally, on a grey evening in February, I pulled into the UVic student parking lot and readied myself for an important class. This time my fear was palpable. Daniel had asked us to present a piece of our writing in front of our colleagues, and tonight it was my turn. I was more frightened than I could remember being in any dojo match or training session. There were so many fears. I was not sure I wanted to reveal myself in front of my colleagues, many of whom I considered more intelligent than myself. I was not sure how appropriate my writing was for an academic class, and, because it was concerned with a deeply personal struggle, I did not know whether or not I should present it as a writing sample. I had decided on reading two selections. One was about my sparring match with Miyuki Takahashi, and the other was a poignant incident in which I had seen

a Japanese girl crying in a subway station. I had been deeply moved by her pain and by her uncharacteristic show of emotion, so unusual for a Japanese.

As I walked I had my coffee with me, carrying it in my right hand as I held onto the strap of my bag. When I got closer to the classroom, I could feel my heart beating heavily. I stopped twice along the way. Suddenly I was not only frightened but angry. This was just a class for God's sake. Why was I so terrified? These were my colleagues and friends. What need was there to be so concerned? Yet I *was* terrified, so terrified that I had to work to control my breathing. I felt as if there was some kind of threat to me, to my image of who I was, and that it was going to manifest itself in this class. Suddenly I felt physically ill. The question was, what kind of threat was it? I felt terribly vulnerable and exposed. Revealing my life and my feelings to others was not just uncomfortable, it was absolutely terrifying.

As I walked down the hall, I asked myself what the nature of the threat was. Was it just exposure? That was unlikely. Everyone in the class was revealing aspects of their lives. It had to be more, and I suspected that it was tied to my identity. Who was being threatened and what was in danger of being lost? I knew that I had crafted an image of myself based on the events of my life—the way of the warrior—they were powerful images that had been given to me, and that I had created through my experiences and imagination. What if that sense of myself was destroyed? What if somehow, because of this course, and the narrative I was writing, I lost my sense of identity completely and no longer knew who I was? In the many years I had been a martial arts disciple, I had known what it was like to “fall out” of myself, to feel that all I had known was not solid, to find

that long-cherished concepts—like my image of Japan, or the value of hard style martial arts—no longer had meaning. I had known what it was like to be unable to know or feel myself, after thinking that I understood myself completely. This felt the same. What if, in the process of all this, I died as a person, as “who I knew myself to be,” and could not come back? It would be like being erased. The warrior karateka and kung fu man, the core image I had of myself, might cease to exist, but if that happened what would replace it? And what if nothing replaced it, and I fell into an abyss, an emptiness, an identity crisis so profound that there would be no way for me, not just to contact the pre-Asia self I had once known, but to recover myself at all? That was the danger, and that was the source of the fear: the terror of having to re-evaluate everything that I once thought I knew about myself.

All of my preconceived ideas were being torn apart. First, I had begun to abandon my earlier concepts of what it meant to be a scholar and academic. During my reminiscences in the cafeteria, I had recalled my devotion to, and belief in, traditional academics. Structure, form, tradition and distance had been very important to me. The canon had been hard and narrow. Now all of that was being questioned through the use of autobiographical narrative. I still struggled with how it could be research. Writing was accelerating the process of personal inquiry. The more I wrote, the more I questioned, and as I did so the more confused and frightened I became. When I began the narrative, I thought that I knew something of who I was as a scholar and human being. I had felt secure in that image; but as I wrote I began to wonder what that sense of self really was, or if it was real at all. That was the truly terrifying part. *Snow Cranes* was beginning to

show me the ephemeral nature of my sense of self, and it was something I did not want to see. Yet if I did not face it, I would not grow. Find a way to truth, get soft. I had told myself that in the kwoon, but I had not known then how difficult or challenging it might be.

I bought another cup of coffee and headed back to the classroom, grateful for the extra time. It would help me to digest what was happening, to try to come to terms with what I was learning. The narrative pointed directly at me. I was the site. I asked myself what the subject of my research was. Was it possible that the subject wasn't: "Writing as research" the course title, academics, or even my experiences in Asia? What if the subject was my *personal* struggle and the way in which that struggle had something to say about being human? Could that be the true subject of my research? Everything I had read indicated that it might be. As I reached the classroom for the second time, I felt a brief impulse to run, but managed to control it and stepped inside.

This was a difficult experience. But then martial arts training had been difficult too. In my classical training I had never achieved anything of lasting value without great sacrifice, perseverance, and a measure of personal pain. I was now learning that the same was true of my graduate school career as well. In the Wu Lin each time I had learned something of significance, I had needed to unlearn something else, and this was also true of my graduate work. Somehow I had to unlearn what I thought I knew about academics. It meant that I had to loosen up and let go of the academy, trusting that my story had value and that writing and learning about myself was legitimate. In the process of doing so I would learn more about what it meant to be both a scholar and a human being.

My presentation was first. I took the writing selections out of my bag and placed them on the table. Other students began to come in and sit down. I was nervous. One of them told me to relax, reminding me that I was among friends. But as Daniel started the class, I was once again forced to use Sifu's breathing techniques to centre myself. I began to read the story of how I had seen a Japanese girl crying in a subway station at Akasaka Mitsuke. As I read, I relived the experience, feeling in my stomach the same sense of compassion I had experienced when I saw her standing in the station. My heart beat heavily, just as it had that moment years ago when I realized the Japanese were people too. My writing became visceral.

No one spoke after the first story, so I continued with the second about my sparring match with Miyuki Takahashi. While reading it, I relived it and felt my lower body move in response to the description of kicks and punches, body shifting and movement, the retelling of power and spirited exchange of technique. I was with Miyuki again, fighting her off, trying to deal with the brilliant combination techniques that were her specialty, and as the last words trailed off, I could feel myself returning to the state of martial repose I had experienced at the time.

I did not immediately look up after finishing, but instead carefully put the papers down, knowing that the deliberate movements would calm me, then looked up. There was a stunned silence. For an instant I wondered if my writing was so bad that my classmates felt embarrassed for me. After a long moment, someone began to speak, commenting on the raw emotional power of the story, and then I understood. My writing had moved them. I felt a powerful sense of relief as I realized that narrative, something that I had

previously considered questionable, had tremendous power. My classmates had responded to my writing, and my experiences had moved out from the particularity of my own world to theirs.

After leaving the class, I thought not only about my personal feelings concerning the worth of my tale but about the legitimacy of narrative in the academy. It was worth telling, but I still was not sure exactly how it was research. When I got home I once again started examining different articles I had read on narrative and its academic value. How was it truly academic? How did what I had written constitute research? Late that night, in an article by Connely and Clandinin I found a quote: "The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative is therefore the study of the way humans experience the world." (Connely and Clandinin, 1980, p.2) This struck me as powerful and important. I was investigating lived experience, the common ground of human existence, and the points of commonality were significant. By examining my own experiences and issues, I would make connections with theories about identity, culture, dislocation, and the ways in which we go about investigating them. I would connect with theory by examining my own life issues and experiences. In another article by Conle I read: "The quest undertaken as a thesis project is already a tacit quest in my life. My lived and academic routes become one road." (Conle, 2000, p. 193) More confirmation. My life experiences and the academy could overlap. In the darkness of my study, quotes began to surface. Narrative was not just naive storytelling. It had meaning. In an article by my own advisor, Antoinette Oberg, I read a description of releasing

oneself into the circle of hermeneutics as a process where by “circling attentively around and around that which is closest and most familiar, it is possible to spin out into awareness of something more general.” (Oberg , 2002, p. 2 ) I put down the articles and rubbed my eyes. Now a connection began to form with my readings in the cafeteria . There was a progression and linkage from narrative to theory and from the particular to the universal. Universality gave personal narrative its value.

*Fist of Warrior, Paper of Scholar*

After that night I felt more convinced than ever that narrative was legitimate and that it was true research. But other concerns remained. I needed to address them before I could completely understand the direction I was going in. Strangely, the concern came to me most often when I was practicing in the kwoon. While executing a kick or punch, or practicing a form, I would suddenly feel that something was incomplete. The feeling was strongest when I performed the kung fu salute. When my hands formed up, the left hand open and the right closed in a fist, I felt uneasy, as though somehow I knew that there was something missing , and that it was connected not only to my martial arts, or academics, but to my very existence, to life itself.

One day, a week after a class with Daniel, I sat down on one of the Chinese stools Jocelyn and I had purchased in Hong Kong and began to think about all that I had gone through and who I was. I was in the kwoon, and, as I looked around, I could see the weapons and accouterments of kung fu. There was another area I had not investigated. It

had to do with my surroundings, the way of kung fu and the way of the East, the difference between the East and West, and the nature of “self”.

As I sipped a cup of tea an old Zen parable came to mind. It was about a young monk who had come before his master to be tested on his knowledge of the dharma. The young man automatically began to state established truths about Buddhism saying that all things were formless, that perception was illusion, that the truth of the dharma, the great teaching, personified itself in emptiness and freedom from attachment. The master said nothing during all that the young man said, but continued to pour tea throughout the monologue, filling the young man’s cup to the brim and then continuing to pour until the contents spilled over onto the table. Finally, unable to contain himself, the young man cried out for him to stop, and the master desisted. “You are like this cup.” he said, “You are full of ideas and notions, but only when you empty your cup will you be able to learn about yourself.”

Did this apply to me? Was there anything else I needed to let go of before true knowledge of who I was could occur? I had already let go of my belief in hard science as the only model of legitimate science. What were the other concepts and notions I had to come to terms with, or get rid of, before I could go forward? Where would I look? I was in a kung fu kwoon, the five fist form ancestors looking over me. In such a setting it was only appropriate to consider the question of the self. Perhaps such a consideration would bring me to an answer. I looked up at my broadsword, the meter of bright steel racked above me. What connection was there between my martial path and the academic and spiritual journey I was now on? I knew the martial arts, and my body welcomed and

embraced the familiar moves I had done for so long. But did I understand the connection between what I had done as a scholar, martial artist and human being?

The movement from hard to soft in the martial arts and in the academy were related. They were part of a greater process of self realization, part of my personal journey. To succeed in the Wu Lin I had needed to empty myself of all preconceived notions. That had been important. I could not practice Tai Chi with the frame of mind of a karateka. In order to practice the soft way my identity as a hard style martial artist had needed to die. I had had to lose that identity to gain a new one. By dying to my former self I had gained a new one because my cup had become empty of all previous notions.

Suddenly I recalled one of my favourite quotations from the thirteenth chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* which read: “Hope and fear are both phantoms that arise from thinking of the self. When we don’t see the self as self, what do we have to fear?” ( Mitchell, 1988, p. 13) What was the notion of self which I needed to see? It was not connected to the movement from hard to soft alone, but rather to self as an issue, and the notion of self.

I took a sip of tea and asked myself another question. Had I considered the Eastern notion of mind , the one symbolized by the open left hand of the kung fu salute? That hand symbolized “no mind” the beneficial emptiness of ego and identity. In the West a person developed themselves by acquiring knowledge, by gaining more and more of it, constantly adding to what they already had. In the East it was the opposite. The person of wisdom divested themselves of their established knowledge and strove for emptiness. Having less meant gaining more. The conventional self, with its solid notions of identity disappeared, moved out of the way so that true self knowledge could be

achieved. This loss of “self” was frightening and difficult, but necessary if progress was to be made. I straightened my back, took a deep breath, and considered what this meant for me.

*Snow Cranes* was about personal transformation. It was a story of the purging of self in pursuit of emptiness. That was the Eastern perspective, the elimination of self and the eventual merging with the *Tao*, the universe. My narrative was about the struggle to attain that emptiness and achieve authenticity. Who I was, and, by implication, who we all are, was an important part of the story. The movement from hard to soft did not just apply academically, but also in terms of self concept.

But who was I anyway? Who was I? Why the hell was I here? Why were any of us here? I suddenly felt frustrated. I was still not getting at the real issue. In China I had asked myself what kind of martial artist I was, and what I needed to know to become a better one. I had been trying to transmute one kind of wisdom into another and move from one perspective to another. I had repeatedly asked myself what sort of martial artist and person I was, even who I was, and now I had to ask the question again, but with more intensity and immediacy than ever before, because now I was getting close, close to core of the issue of self, myself, and what it meant to say “I”. What did that “I” mean?

I thought about my father’s life and my own, how we had both grappled with what it meant to be alive. In mortal combat on the battlefield, or in the struggles of the kwoon it was the same: the struggle for meaning. Why did we have to undergo this existence, forging ourselves in sometimes unbearable pain and struggle, trying so

desperately to understand the dichotomies of life: the hard and soft, pain and pleasure, purpose and meaninglessness, life and death? What was the issue here?

*Snow Cranes* was about more than academics, even more than the struggle from hard to soft in the academy. That was only part of it, perhaps not even the most important part. The sky and the trees didn't care about academics. My father had not thought about academics when he was dueling for his life with a German soldier, and I had not thought about it during the endless hours of grueling training in China and Japan, seeing the look in Sifu's eyes when he was bearing down on me. I needed to go somewhere else if I hoped to understand what I had gone through, and why I had written *Snow Cranes* in the first place. What was *Snow Cranes* really about, and what question was it meant to answer ?

Once again I thought about Taoism, that which had informed me for so long and which was at the center of my questioning. I walked a strange and precarious line between East and West, and between Eastern and Western thinking. I had moved from hard to soft, progressing along a line of experience as though hard was one element and soft was another. But was this the Tao? The real Tao was fluid and encompassed both hard and soft. There *was* no line of distinction. That was illusion, just talk. The contradiction of the Tao was that soft was hard and hard was soft. There was no exclusivity. Life was both. My father cuts down an enemy, then lovingly and tearfully cradles his corpse. I down Winky then practice the tea ceremony: no boundaries, all part of the same flow.

I live the dichotomy in every instant, and it is a strange and contradictory one, But I also live the reciprocity of it. Hard informs soft, soft informs hard. We need them

both: existence is both, not one. What was *Snow Cranes*? An answer to the question who am I? Who the hell *am* I? The more I had tried to hold it the more it slipped away, and the more fluid it became. The Western way of looking at it was to “tie it down”. Suddenly I laughed out loud. I am a Shriner. Big identity. I am Western. Same big joke. I am a scholar. Maybe the same laughable attachment, because it is impossible to hold *It* down like that.

My struggle had been, and still was, to try and understand all of these conflicting dichotomies, and certainly I had felt and experienced them deeply. I had been a Westerner in Eastern life, and I had experienced the terrible dislocation and tension of that. I had been an Easterner returning to the West, so uncomfortable with Western customs that they had made my skin crawl. But I had never really been exclusively *of* either of them, because at the same time I was one I was the other. To be Western in some exclusive way was impossible for me. I had been brought up Eastern, and to be exclusively of the East was also impossible. I was Western. There was no holding on to a solid sense of any of it. Perhaps that was the greatest illusion.

Buddhism taught that the way to become wise was to let go, to empty oneself of the capital “S” self which we cherish so much. For a long time I had been holding on to many cherished ideas: martial artist, academic, Buddhist, wandering warrior, lover, fighter, teacher, son. The list went on. Now it was time to let go of all of them. I had to drop them in the academy and in outside life, and by doing so free myself. Those were the gates spoken of in *Snow Cranes*. Each gateway had been a step in the process of releasing the self. The pieces of armour had been the cherished notions of what made up

my identity, and I had dropped each piece as I overcame the fear of facing a formless and fluid self.

I asked myself what would happen if I let go of all the exclusive truth in the academy and in life, all my images of myself, whatever they might be. It would be a kind of academic and spiritual freefall. I would have to be so totally open as a scholar and as a human being, that it might feel as though I had eliminated all points of reference. What would it be like to live such a life, the life of a “forever fluid” self, the one described in the *Tao Te Ching* ?

I put down my tea. I needed to move while I thought. Getting up and stretching a little, I walked to the altar and lit the customary three sticks of incense. Taking the broadsword out of its sheath, I twirled it a few times, feeling the satisfying sensation in my wrist as the steel arched over and around me. Practicing always helped me think more clearly, and I now needed to center my thoughts in a familiar context. I performed some circular moves with the blade and then returned to my thoughts.

What did it all mean? The Eastern version of wisdom depended on interconnectedness. When you merged with the Tao and became one with all things, going beyond discrimination, you lost yourself, then you became wise. It was the opposite of the West and of the traditional academy. Boxes within boxes, puzzles within puzzles. I swung the broadsword again, enjoying the satisfying sound it made as it pulled on the air, and then I began to practice a few moves from the sword of the dragon pool form. I sprung lightly onto one leg, thrusting with the tip of the blade and, as my body began to warm to the moves, thoughts began to arise.

How did self, and the consideration of self, tie into the issue of autobiography as personal revelation? Looking at the self was a way to research life, and life was a manifestation of the self. Tuck and turn, spin and move, the broadsword sucked the air as I used the pommel in a sudden upward motion to strike at an imaginary opponent's chin. Only when we have the courage to tell our story does life become accessible. Pierce and cut, crouch and thrust, then leap into a sliding move with the left hand reversed in an inverted crane strike. Once again my kung fu practice, academic life, and spiritual journey were becoming one.

As I began to work up a sweat, and as the familiar moves stretched and expanded my body, my mind also opened. What was I doing in writing *Snow Cranes*? Telling my story was a way to understand what it meant to be alive and my connectedness to the world around me. My stories pierced the boundary and brought my struggle for personal meaning into the academy. I recalled what Grumet had said: "It is here that curriculum as thought is revealed as the screen through which we pass curriculum as lived." (Grumet, 1978-79, p.141). The pathos and passion of my personal life had passed onto the academic page.

But there was a deep irony here, for only by going outside the academy could I find a way to articulate the life truths within it. Through going outside it I had merged East and West. The Eastern concept of wisdom as the loss of self had been wed to the Western notion of wisdom as intellectual rigour. As I performed a deep sweeping cut with the sword I recalled a line from an article by Conle: "As a narrative inquirer I had to function "from my whole being" not simply from the level of the intellect." (Conle, 1999,

p.11) I had to feel the significance of my story in the academy, on the floor of the kwoon, and in the convoluted and tortuous probings of my inner self. The tassel of the broadsword whipped past my face, and I recalled something my advisor had written in one of her articles:

Opening refers to opening to the unexpected with more than the conscious rational mind. The mind's desire for predictability and closure must be suspended, as must tendencies to judge what is happening in terms of criteria made available by conventional discourses of research methods. Holding refers to holding the intention to articulate an enduring interest even when the going gets rough, when the way becomes blocked, when the path gets slippery, when what seemed like a place of arrival turns out to be a cul de sac. (Oberg, 2002, p.4 )

This was what made storytelling so difficult, and why it required so much courage to engage in it.

I cut and came up in a twist stance, then stepped up to a natural posture just as I had in the temple courtyard in Guangzhou. The sword whirled in a figure eight pattern circling the blade of my imaginary opponent and trapping it, then came to a deathly still pause, a moment of watchfulness. In that moment I considered the path I was treading . I was struggled with the notion of hard and soft, and up to now had thought that it was the main focus of the work only to discover that Snow Cranes pointed directly back at me,

as if it were a mirror cleverly disguised as a document. I had begun to realize that on the night I had read my writing aloud in Daniel's class.

Through my writing I had been trying to access my connectedness to the world and the universe around me through my personal experiences. I thought about this. When I looked at myself I was able to see the world in my actions, beliefs, feelings and difficulties. I shared with the universe around me, the connected experience of being alive and sharing in existence. The truths which are unspoken about life: its difficulties, revelations, disappointments, triumphs, the illusory nature of its truths and the tapestry of its events, were laid bare by telling my story to others. By revealing myself I showed rather than told. I walked a more direct and powerful path, and through telling my story in the academy I reached out from my position of particularity, to general life and truth in the events around me. The *Tao Te Ching* enjoins us in verse thirteen to: "See the world as your self." (Mitchell, 1988, p. 13) And, again, in verse seventeen, it states: "Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source. Returning to the source is serenity" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 16). When we share our stories with others as research, truths are revealed, others are touched, and we return to the common ground and source of our being.

To properly attain wisdom in the world of the Tao we must lose ourselves. In and out of the academy I had to loose the "self" of my accepted notions, the traditional ideas of scholarship, the third person voice, the inaccessibility, the disconnected stance and rigid adherence to form. Outside the academy I needed to lose the images of who I

thought I was. The telling of stories was a vital part of this process. Grumet had said “The persuasion of autobiography resembles that of fiction. Detail is required to demonstrate lawful possession of the tale” (Grumet, 1978-1979, p. 142) It was the detail of my life that provided the core of my research and gave me possession of it. Grumet described it as: “the relation of the knower to the known (and the unknown) that is manifested in the concrete images of lived worlds.” (Grumet, 1978-1979, p. 142 )

I was in the last five moves of sword of the dragon pool. They were a difficult series of movements: an intricate chain of three low cuts followed by two quick turns in succession, a low stance then an upright hanging horse stance on one leg, a final flourish with the sword and finally a last open hand salute. There was the salute again. There was no fist because the right hand held a weapon, only the left held was open and still: the hand of emptiness.

### *Glimpsing a Formless Void*

My notion of many aspects of my life had changed. I had embraced and accepted the value of narrative. I had gone from a rigid definition of academics and research to a softer one based on the value of lived experience and narrative inquiry, and I had found support for this softer more inclusive approach in the work of established scholars, such as Conle, Grumet, Pinar, and others. I had looked deeply at my ideas of self and identity and had begun to accept that examination as part of my development, something that would continue as I dealt with the issue of what it meant to function with an open

formless sense of self. Shifting my notion of research shifted my idea of scholarship, and that change had shown me that my ideas of my pre-Asian and Asian self were not, themselves, solid.

I looked around my book lined study and wondered about the many different notions of identity. For a moment I remembered how I had previously thought of myself. In years gone by I thought I knew who I was. I was a classical martial artist. I was a Westerner. I was Buddhist. I believed in rigour in the martial arts and in the academy. I was a traditionalist and disdained innovation in the martial arts and experimentation in scholarship. Ironically, while I practiced Buddhism, a belief system that emphasized non-attachment, change, and the ephemeral nature of existence, I considered my notion of myself to be solid. But both Taoism and Buddhism did not see a person's sense of identity as solid. No solid sense of "self" existed.

I reached up and pulled down my copy of the *Tao Te Ching*. Once again, in order to gain perspective, I would have to balance East and West. In the twenty-fourth chapter I found the quotation: "He who defines himself can't know who he really is." (Mitchell, 1988, p. 24) I had a habit of leafing through the text in search of quotes relating to my life. It always worked. In the fifty-ninth chapter I found a quotation about moderation that read: "For governing a country well there is nothing better than moderation. The mark of a moderate man is freedom from his own ideas." (Mitchell, 1988, p. 59) Now I remembered more about what constituted the Eastern notion of identity: There was no ultimately solid identity to hold on to. The more I tried to form a solid sense of self, the

more I strayed from it. To hold on to notions of personal identity, under the constant pressure and flow of change is to lose them.

I stopped for a moment and looked up from the text. Had the youthful identity I had constructed been permanent? Suddenly I realized that there was even now no solid sense of “my” self. There was nothing I could grasp on to. I had been on shifting ground the whole time. All of my life I had experienced a profound sense of cultural and spiritual dislocation. I had been torn between ideas of myself as Eastern in a Western world, and I had struggled to come to terms with the images of the East given to me by my father and the reality of the Asia I had lived in.

I had felt this as a “falling out”, a feeling of not knowing who I was, and a suspicion that the symbols I had used to confirm my identity could not hold. Like my father, I had come back from a foreign land as a wounded warrior, seeking balance and trying to determine who I had once been, and who I now was. *Snow Cranes* was an attempt to come to terms with this. The text was not only an academic text, but also a chronicle of my personal journey. It had become a rich odyssey of the self, a creative ride in which I had looked deeply at who I was as a Westerner and a human being.

When I returned to Canada I had tried to establish something solid. I had acquired a house, middle-class accouterments, a position as a teacher, and an identity as a householder. I had re-entered the “hard” nature of North American life, rooting my identity in material acquisition and certification. It had come close to overwhelming me, and had very nearly destroyed my connection to the world of Sifu’s teachings. Now I had to balance the hard materialism of that world with the softer wisdom I had learned in

It had been four years since Daniel's class, and I was in the final stages of *Snow Cranes*, writing about my kung fu training in China and my return to Canada. The text had changed many times. As I revised the text I had more insights. I now knew that I was the "snow crane." I was the one who had left my former self and would not now return. It was gone, leaving only an imprint in the snow. I had gone to the East as one person and was now entirely different. I had challenged my notions of myself and of the academy. In a way, the narrative had forced itself upon me. I needed to write the text so that I could reach through and find myself. The compulsion to write it had been born of the pain of growth and the desire to understand what had happened to me and who I had become.

I finished the last of the ten Chang Chuan sequences and paced the floor. I had come to the kwoon to gain perspective on the journey *Snow Cranes* had taken me on. My students were not due to arrive for another half an hour, and I had plenty of time. I walked over to the wall, picked up a white waxwood staff, and began to twirl it. I loved the staff. Its wide, expressive, and dynamic movements always made me feel flexible and alive, but at the same time calm and centered. Now I began the movements of Monkey King Staff, expressive, clever, and powerful. As the staff sucked the air, I imitated the movements of the mischievous Buddhist deity, and my mind returned to my odyssey.

It had been a difficult and sometimes terrifying one. My idea of *self* had been challenged, and I had come to know that, as time went by, I had changed, and was still changing. In the beginning I had been so sure. I began a story of Asia and the martial arts, but had finished by composing a work about the struggle to heal myself and achieve coherence.

I had struggled through each stage of the narrative, forced to release cherished notions of myself as scholar, martial artist, and human being. As I passed through each gateway I had been forced to abandon parts of that pre-conceived self. Before *Snow Cranes* I had thought learning was about acquiring concepts, but in the course of writing it had learned that it was about shedding them. I had feared the loss of all that I knew myself to be, thought that perhaps even others might no longer know me, and that I might be erased as a human being.

Writing the work had left me vulnerable. As the staff whirled around me, I asked myself where that vulnerability had come from, and now knew that it had come from fear. But vulnerability had also helped me to grow. Without it I could not have gained new perspectives on myself and the academy. I twirled the staff one last time and gave the traditional salute.

Let go, relax, and the technique will flow. As the staff settled softly into its position at my side, I reminded myself that rigidity was the enemy of the martial artist and of all true scholars and human beings. Once, after a grueling practice session, Sifu had pulled me to one side and tapped my shoulders. "Fang song ," he had said with a laugh, "Fang song. Relax. Relax." I smiled as I remembered his beaming face that day, and a last line from the seventy eighth verse of the Tao Te Ching came to me: "The soft overcomes the hard. The slow overcomes the fast." ( Mitchell ,1988, p. 78 ). I lay the staff down and saluted my teachers in the academy and the kwoon one last time.

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