



“Grandmaster” by Dean Weber: Free Excerpt

GRANDMASTER

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DEAN WEBER

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To Shihan (Master) Fred T. Corritone

Friend, karate teacher

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“And so I say.....be like water, my friend.”

----Bruce Lee

CHAPTER 1

The distinct sound of a violent disturbance crashed into Kelvin’s ears. He had just returned from an invigorating five mile run around campus, located at a large University on the eastern

part of Long Island. A bit tired, and, for him, less aware of his surroundings than he normally was, Kelvin was not sure, nor concerned, about the cause of the cracking sound that had reached his ears. He was however familiar with the sound. It was the noise created by the sudden breaking of glass.

Being at a bar, it instantly occurred to him that some bad shit was going down. It was. Two creeps about 10 feet away were arguing over who had the rights to a particular female, who was sitting at one end of the bar. After some loud talk, one of the creeps had smashed a beer bottle against the bar and was threatening to do injury to the other creep. Kelvin, who rarely frequented bars, thought to himself that it seemed bad luck to have stumbled into this situation on just this occasion. He relaxed, as always, threw 20-30 rapid punches in his mind, and quietly sauntered out of the bar. No one bothered him.

He walked back to the University campus, at which he was an advanced Philosophy student, working on a doctoral thesis. He was working on a unification theory of sorts. He was analyzing the connections between certain aspects of eastern philosophy and the philosophies of Plato. He had studied, in depth, the various Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, Socrates, and others, but was most interested in Plato and his school. Back then, in the days of Plato, Kelvin felt a sense that Western philosophy had a common link, a certain sense of connection with Zen. Kelvin felt that this link was degraded when Western philosophy became heavy with the Aristotelian view of the world. He was having a lot of fun connecting these worlds.

Kelvin’s world was Zen. Everything was a fluid, non-stagnant reality, and he immersed himself in it. In addition to being an “A”

student, he was a seriously accomplished martial artist. At the campus, there were many karate schools, and other martial arts “dojos.” All of these schools had very qualified instructors, second, third, and even fourth “degree” Black belts – a very high level. Kelvin had no rank, but it was acknowledged that there was no comparison between him and any other instructor on campus- or for that matter, any other martial artist of any level. He had a physique unlike any other – not super huge like a weight lifter-but lithe, yet massively powerful, with abdominal muscles that he could control like a puppeteer.

Unlike most martial artists, even the highly ranked, Kelvin moved in ways alien to most. He could easily jump over an opponent, landing on the other side, and, quite rightly surprising the daylights out of him. His abdominals were so strong and controlled that an opponent, should he dare to punch Kelvin’s stomach, could easily find his fist caught in the vice-like muscles that Kelvin possessed and controlled. He could move his body faster and more effortlessly than any person, and could whip out a series of punches in a manner that resembled a machine gun spewing out a hail of bullets.

Prior to settling down to a long session of writing part of his thesis, he decided to go visit a karate club on campus. This school, or dojo, was well known for conducting rigorous and gruelling sessions of Japanese based Karate. The instructor was a very serious, well conditioned martial artist. The class had just worked out for an hour and a half, and the part of the class devoted to sparring, or fighting, was about to commence. The sparring contestants were allowed to hit each other in the body with a moderate degree of force, and very light, or no contact to the face.

A great degree of control was expected, and in fact, was maintained at most times.

The instructor pointed to two students, one a black belt, which is the highest rank, and his adversary, a brown belt, the second highest rank. The instructor signalled that the students commence sparring. There was an accompanying nervous tension in the air, as the first exchange of blows was anxiously awaited by the contestants and the watching class of students. After a brief second or two of hesitation, the black belt student closed the gap between himself and his adversary by launching a series of side kicks, followed by a rear arm, or “reverse” punch. The brown belt was unable to sidestep or otherwise avoid the black belt’s quick and powerful blows. A thud was distinctly heard as the blows crashed into the brown belt’s torso. Fortunately, the black belt had exhibited the requisite control of power, otherwise the brown belt student would have been killed or severely wounded.

The instructor instantly screamed, “Hajime,” or stop! in Japanese. The contestants immediately ceased fighting, and the brown belt student was commanded to take a seat by the instructor. At that moment, Kelvin appeared in the doorway to the dojo.

Mike, the instructor, instantly recognized the unique, powerful vitality that was the person of Kelvin. The two martial artists bowed to each other upon recognition. It was unusual for any person to simply barge in on Mike’s karate class, no less to be recognized and catered to by the courteous act of bowing. But then again, Kelvin wasn’t simply “any person.”

The students of the karate class were a bit befuddled at the action of their instructor. They did not recognize Kelvin and could

not figure out why their teacher was allowing an outsider in to the class. They were even more surprised when Mike made a motion with his hand, beckoning Kelvin in to participate in the sparring session. This was almost unheard of, in that Kelvin was a seeming stranger, and, to boot, he wasn't even wearing the necessary karate outfit known as a *gi*. Rather, he was attired in a sweat suit type outfit, albeit a nice one.

Without hesitation, Kelvin walked toward the centre of the dojo, approximately ten feet apart from the black belt, who was to be his adversary. The black belt student was a bit uneasy, but the instructor assured him that Kelvin was a fellow martial artist, and that the black belt student could go all out, while of course exhibiting the requisite control, so as not to cause undue injury.

The black belt and Kelvin bowed to each other, as is customary in a karate sparring match. As before, the black belt launched a series of side kicks, this time lightning fast, followed by a reverse punch. The outcome of the attack was vastly different than before. For a second, the karate black belt thought that Kelvin had vanished - the kicks and punch hit nothing. Instead, the black belt felt a deadening series of blows being perpetrated against his arm. Kelvin had instantly sidestepped the black belt's attack, and had himself countered with a super rapid series of forearm blows launched against the other student's arm. This machine gun like attack of violently quick and powerful blows caused the black belt to instantly cease his attack. Kelvin had of course utilized only a slight fraction of his total power against the student, but the experience was still quite unsettling. The blows, a product of Kelvin's many years of studying the praying mantis style of Kung Fu, among others, were totally unexpected by the karate student.

The student was not prepared to deal with the circular nature of Kelvin’s attack, but was rather, used to more linear, straight on attacks. Kelvin immediately praised the black belt for his powerful kicks, and Kelvin left the centre of the dojo, after bowing to the student and instructor.

The black belt student also left the centre or fighting space section of the dojo. The rest of the class assumed that an end had come to the kumite, or sparring session – but they were in for a surprise. Just when the students thought that class was about to end, Mike made a simple gesture with his right hand, indicating to Kelvin to join Mike in the centre fighting section of the dojo. There was a sudden, palpable tenseness in the air of the school. Mike had sparred invited guests on previous occasions, but, this was the first time an uninvited martial artist had been “called out” to spar. Mike, attired in his full formal karate uniform or *gi* (pronounced “g” as in guide, “gee”), with his beautiful black belt anointed with three red stripes, indicating that he was not “simply” a regular first level black belt, but was a third degree black belt, a considerable achievement in any style of karate. This contrasted sharply with the total informality of Kelvin’s garb. Kelvin’s sweat suit was a bright yellow and was rather sleek in design.

What the class could not have known was that Mike Santamaria, head instructor of the dojo was a good friend of Kelvin, this new visitor. Santamaria, twenty-eight years of age had done a four year stint in the Marine Corps before starting a dojo in Suffolk County, Long Island.

Santamaria had been stationed for a time in Okinawa, and after that, in Japan. It was in Okinawa that Mike had received his first introduction to the martial arts. Yes, he had received hand to

hand training in the Corps, and he did well at it, but what he saw in Okinawa was quite different and to him, spectacular. He saw eighty year old men, masters of various styles of karate, working out full blast - amazingly hard for their age. In Japan, Mike was exposed to Goju karate, a popular style of Japanese karate. Mike learned that Goju literally meant “hard/soft”, and this combining of two seeming opposites into one united whole appealed to Mike’s aesthetic sense as an artist, and to his practical sense as a fighter. Mike was stationed at Japan for two years, and during that time, he trained very hard several days per week under the tutelage and close scrutiny of the descendants of Gogen Yamaguchi, a great karate master, known in the martial arts world as “The Cat.”

Mike not only trained hard, he thrived. He loved the incredibly rigorous workouts that are famous in Japanese karate Schools. He very much liked not only the fighting aspects as practiced in kumite (pronounced Koomeetay), but he also enjoyed, no, relished learning and studying the various kata, or forms, that were native to this Goju style of karate. Mike learned that kata are a prearranged sequence of steps and move, such as blocks and strikes. The karate student must become proficient in mastering all of the moves in each kata. Some kata contain as many as seventy moves, and can be quite complicated and very difficult to execute properly. Mike succeeded in mastering over ten kata, and, he also became an excellent fighter. After leaving Japan, Mike continued advanced karate study with several great Goju instructors in the United States, and he eventually earned his third degree black belt.

After leaving the Corps, it seemed natural that Mike thought of opening his own dojo. It was a tough go at first, especially since

he married his wife, Cindy, shortly after his discharge from the Corps. Mike had saved up some money, and with the help of Cindy’s parents, he opened his first school. It took a couple of lean years, but soon, Mike had one of the best run larger schools in Suffolk County. In fact, he had well over five hundred students. Mike’s dedication and skill made it apparent to all of his students and fellow martial artists, that his school was THE place to learn Japanese karate. He was a firm, yet kind instructor – which flowed from his being a good person. His natural affinity for people had created a sense of worth in his students. Unlike other instructors at other karate schools, Mike did not brow beat his students, but he treated his students with respect, and was able to show them the right way to do things, without bullying.

After establishing his first school, Mike decided to start a small dojo on the campus at the local University. It was a large campus, and within a few months, the new dojo was thriving. Mike’s life was now getting very busy, because in addition to the two schools, he and Cindy had started a family, with two children, Jason, three years of age, and Laura, one. They had purchased a home, again with the help of Cindy’s parents in Setauket, a small hamlet in Suffolk County, and near to the University. Mike was even planning on enrolling as a student at the University. He wanted to get a degree in psychology, but now, he was so busy running the two schools, and being a father and husband, that he had to reluctantly put off the idea of being a student for a while.

Kelvin moved directly to the centre of the dojo. Mike took a position approximately ten feet apart from Kelvin. Mike instructed his top black belt student, Jim, to start the match. Jim, a very

dedicated black belt, who had studied under several noted instructors before encountering Mike, was sort of feeling sorry for Kelvin. Except for the brief sparring session, Jim had no real notion of Kelvin’s fighting abilities. Jim could only think that Kelvin would be soundly “beaten,” as were all of the opponents who were unlucky enough to spar with Mike. Mike was one tough fighter, and he had amply demonstrated his skills on the many other “visiting instructors” who had cared to come to the school and spar. Mike had sparred in front of his students against several local instructors, of many divergent styles. All walked away with the vestiges of Mike’s skills, in the form of black and blue marks, bone bruises, and the like, and this was with Mike exhibiting a great deal of control. Kelvin, this new “unknown,” might very well incite Mike to fight a bit harder – after all, the stranger was totally informal – no *gi* – no belt, nothing. The students knew that Mike did not take informality in karate lightly.

The two contestants bowed to each other, and then to Jim, who would start the match. With the air heavy with tension, Jim screamed a quick command to start. Time seemed to stand still for a brief second, as the students really didn’t know what to expect. Mike adopted a familiar stance, called the cat stance. In this stance, much of Mike’s weight was on the rear leg, and the front leg is bent and brought close into the body. The ball of Mike’s foot was resting lightly on the dojo floor. The stance creates a spring-like tension, enabling the martial artist to move about, with bursts of power.

Kelvin adopted an informal looking stance, with both arms up, and he was in a very relaxed state as evidenced by any outward lack of visible tension, in either his facial expression, or

body language. Only a brief fraction of a second had passed, when suddenly Mike took a quick, shuffling step forward with his left leg, which was his front leg, the leg that had been resting lightly on the floor. Using his rear leg as a base, Mike fired a roundhouse kick to Kelvin’s rib-cage area, at the left side of his body. A roundhouse kick, when launched from the lead or front leg, comes up and around, from the outside toward the inside. It is a powerful and quick kick, and it can be very difficult to block. These highly skilled contestants were also highly controlled since neither was wearing any protective gear, such as gloves or foot coverings, or mouthpieces. They trusted each other not to hit too hard, and not to make any significant contact to the face or groin areas. The concept and reality of NOT HITTING TOO HARD required a great deal of control and focus.

Many karate students, of any level, would have attempted to block the kick. Kelvin did not do the expected. He instantly, almost imperceptibly stepped backwards, just a half foot, and allowed Mike’s kick to miss the rib area and go harmlessly by, without any effect. Instantly after, Kelvin stepped quickly forward a bit with his left leg, and then, to the surprise of the class, he crouched down low and spun around like a whirling top, and, using his right leg as a pivot, he came around at FLOOR LEVEL, with his left leg extended in the direction of the lower part of Mike’s legs, just above the ankles. This technique is known as the “iron broom” technique, and is popular in several styles of Kung Fu. It is a very difficult technique to master, and it is very difficult to execute. It requires great leg strength, balance, and a very high level of coordination.

The “broom” caught Mike just above the ankle of his rear leg.

This was the leg that hadn't kicked, and was therefore acting as Mike's base, or support for having launched the kick. Kelvin executed the technique just hard enough to cause Mike to fall to the ground, but not so hard as to do damage to Mike's leg. On the streets, or on a hard floor, this technique could do very serious damage not only from the blow to the leg, but the sudden fall to the person being toppled can result in serious injuries. Fortunately, at the dojo, Mike had installed thick mats similar to those used in wrestling rooms. Even after the unusual and lightning quick attack by Kelvin, Mike recovered very quickly, and like a cat, rolled to his left and leaped to his feet, by springing up. The students were looking on in amazement, justifiably in awe of the visitor who could do this to their instructor! The students suddenly “saw” Kelvin as if for the first time, anew. They realized that his legs were massive at the thighs, and that his forearms were extremely large and powerful – unlike body-builders who tend to develop large biceps. They saw a powerful chest, not huge in the pectoral area, but, when coupled with the great girth of his powerful back and shoulders, it presented a formidable upper torso area.

Mike, on his feet again, showed no signs of being flustered. He was in a stance now, with his left leg in front. This time, Mike again attacked first. He used a back fist attack with his lead left arm, kind of like a jab, and he did it in a lightning fast manner. Then, he shuffled forward just a bit, and before even retracting his left jab fully, he kept moving forward, and suddenly, spinning around towards the front, straight at Kelvin. Mike was bringing his RIGHT fist around, in a technique known as a spinning back fist, which utilizes the forward, spinning motion of the attacker. It is a very fast and powerful move, designed to hit the opponent at the

head level. It is a move that even a very advanced martial artist has difficulty blocking or otherwise evading. Against a normal, non-skilled fighter, it is especially deadly because it is so unexpected – it’s quick and unorthodox – a lethal combination.

Of course, Kelvin was not a “normal” fighter. With both powerful arms up as a guard, Kelvin leaned back to avoid the advancing spinning back fist, and while also still protecting his head area with two raised forearms, Kelvin quickly thrust out a side kick to Mike’s rib area. Kelvin’s legs were so massive and powerful, that a quick kick from them could easily collapse an adversary’s ribs, causing massive injury. Kelvin of course controlled his kick so that Mike felt only a mildly heavy impact. It also helped that the contestants weren’t wearing shoes, since footwear is not worn during a karate class. Most fighters would have been quite stunned to have been countered in such a rapid fashion. It required amazing timing for Kelvin to have not only avoided Mike’s spinning back fist, but to also have landed a side kick as a counter move at just the right movement was an awesome sight to behold. Mike however, was not flustered. Immediately after being hit by the side kick, Mike instantly swung around in the opposite direction, with another spinning back fist, this time with his other fist. This required an amazing, almost instantaneous change of direction. Kelvin was however, ready for the renewed attack. By keeping his massive forearms up in a guard position, he blocked Mike’s spinning back fist in its tracks. This caused Mike’s body to come to a dead halt, whereupon Kelvin instantly seized Mike’s out of balance body, in a powerful bear hug-like grab. The raw power of Kelvin’s grasp left Mike powerless to do anything.

At that moment, Mike screamed out, “You bastard – you won again!” It was a rare moment of levity on Mike’s part, and Kelvin and Mike playfully separated, and then, as is the custom after sparring, they bowed respectfully to each other. The class seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief, as the tension was broken, as they realized the great enjoyment that the two men had derived from their sparring match.

The class could sense that these two men were not unknown to each other, but rather, a definite friendship clearly exuded from their teacher and this obviously very greatly skilled visitor. Mike had never mentioned this visitor to his class. As a matter of fact, Mike had only discussed Kelvin with his wife. More than that, Kelvin had been to Mike’s house on numerous occasions, and, in fact had become the closest friend that Mike ever had.

CHAPTER 2

It happened about a year earlier. Mike had been enjoying a quiet, relaxing evening at home with his wife and family, when suddenly the telephone rang. Cindy noticed the instant change in Mike’s expression, from one of peacefulness, to one of shocked horror. Mike was speaking to someone in a rapidly more agitated pace. By the time Mike got off the telephone, Cindy could see that something was horribly wrong.

Cindy said, “What’s wrong honey?”

Mike answered, after a brief moment, “one of my students just called and told me that Eddie was beaten up pretty badly and is in the hospital.”

Eddie was a student of Mike’s, a green belt, which is a middle level up the ladder of karate belts. Being a very dedicated teacher, Mike was very involved with most of his students’ lives, and what happened to Eddie was quite upsetting.

“How badly hurt is he?” Cindy asked worriedly.

Mike answered that the student who called said that Eddie was fortunate. Even though injured, the injuries were not life threatening, mostly broken bones involving, it seemed, the right arm, and some pretty extensive bruising. Without any further delay, Mike set off to the hospital to visit his green belt student.

The hospital was located just a few miles from the University. Eddie was one of the students who attended Mike’s dojo at the University campus, not Mike’s larger dojo in town off campus. It was about 8:00 o’clock in the evening, and Mike arrived at the hospital in about fifteen minutes, after a short drive. He entered the hospital, and after making his way past the Admissions Desk, he took the elevator up to the fifth floor, which was where Eddie’s room was. Mike had to lie to the admissions personnel to visit Eddie because it was after hours, and the hospital had a strict policy of no visitors except for closest family after 6:00 p.m. Mike told the Admissions Desk that Eddie was his son - which wasn’t too far off. Eddie really had no father – he had run off years ago, and at the age of nineteen, Eddie had been raised by his mom. During the past year, Mike had become very close to Eddie as both a trusted teacher and a good friend. Eddie had also welcomed Mike as a kind of father figure. Mike had invited Eddie to his house on many occasions, and a close relationship had developed. Cindy had also become fast friends with Eddie’s Mom, Debbie, so the news of Eddie’s beating did not sit well with the Santamaria family, to say the least.

The elevator ride to the fifth floor seemed to take an hour. There weren’t many people around this late, with the exception of a skeleton crew of nurses and residents. The elevator finally

reached the fifth floor, and Mike got off and looked for Room 5212, the room in which Eddie was recuperating. Mike found the room after a minute, and he somewhat nervously entered the room. Eddie was lying in a bed in a semi reclining position. The bed was angled at about thirty degrees vertical, and Mike could see that Eddie’s right arm was in a cast. Also, there was a large purplish mark on Eddie’s left cheek. That’s all that was visible to Mike at that point regarding Eddie’s injuries. Upon entry into the room, Mike immediately noticed that Eddie was awake.

Mike stepped quickly toward Eddie’s bed and softly put his arm on Eddie’s left shoulder, being careful to avoid the right side of Eddie’s body, which seemed more badly injured.

“Hey kid, how’re ya feeling?” Mike said in a hushed tone. He wasn’t sure if Eddie had been sedated, or if he had received pain killers. Eddie seemed tired, but definitely awake and aware of his surroundings.

“Ok I guess,” Eddie said. He grimaced a bit when he said it. Mike proceeded slowly, not wanting to press Eddie too fast for information. He walked around the room a bit, looked out the window, and then returned to the bedside, and then said, “If you can, tell me what happened? Who did this to you?” Mike’s tone was a lot more animated, as it was difficult to control himself. Here was not only his student lying badly beaten in a hospital bed, but also his friend, and a person who had become almost like a son. Eddie sat up a little more, and got into the most comfortable position that he could. He wanted to recount to Mike what had happened earlier that day.

“Me and John met up today at about 3:00, and we just started walking around town.” John, a friend of Eddie’s, was also a

karate student, but at a different dojo than Mike’s. John was also a green belt, and he knew Eddie from their high school days. They met in tenth grade, and had become fast friends. In eleventh grade, John had begun studying Shotokan Karate, which is also a Japanese Style, in fact, the most widely practiced style. John had really devoted himself to practicing the art, and he and Eddie were not only high school buddies, but more, fellow martial artists.

John and Eddie lived near the University, and were walking in a small town or village, about a mile from the big school. They went into a couple of the shops and small stores. They were both familiar with many of the storeowners, as this was a small village, typical of eastern Long Island. This was not yet the bustling larger towns that existed in Nassau County, which is located on the western part of Long Island, closer to Queens, and Manhattan. In these smaller villages, people still actually knew each other. Also, it was 1975, a much quieter, less technologically oriented time. Computers, cell phones, ATM’s, and the like were all in their infancy, or barely existing, and in this distant era, people still had time to get to know each other, especially in these smaller locales. After about an hour or two of just ambling about, somewhat aimlessly, the young men decided to get a couple of cold beers.

Since it was 1975, they were legally allowed to enter a bar type establishment and order whatever they wanted. Some years later, they would be too young, as the legal drinking age would become twenty-one in New York. But, for Eddie and John, time was still on their side as far as the law was concerned.

It was a hot, late September day, muggy, as was common in the late summer. The boys were sweaty, just from having walked around. They entered a place called “The Mad Hatter,” a well

frequented establishment. The place was quite large, and was more than just a bar – it was a meeting place, and on the weekends, it had a section for dancing and a live band. It was busy pretty much every night of the week, except Sunday and Monday nights. The day John and Eddie entered the “Hatter,” it was a Thursday at about 5:30. There weren’t a lot of patrons since it was kind of an off hour-not too early, nor too late. The boys had been there before, and knew the bartender Jim.

Eddie said, “hey Jim, two beers.” Jim knew that Eddie and John wanted two tap beers, Heinekens, and he placed them in front of the two young men.

“Here you go – hey, you guys are a little early today.” John and Eddie laughed a little – they usually came to the “Hatter” at at least 8:00 o’clock.

“Just a quick pit stop,” Eddie said. “It’s so damn hot out there today-when’s autumn gonna kick in?”

Jim grunted, and took the dollar for the two beers. “John and Eddie grabbed the two cold ones, and both took long, thirst quenching gulps.

“Nothing better than a cold Heiny,” John blurted.

“Damn straight,” said Eddie, almost spraying John with cold beer as he said it. John looked around the place, quietly reflected for a moment, then asked Eddie how the karate training was going. Eddie and John frequently discussed their respective dojos and instructors.

Eddie told John that he was learning a new kata, called Sanchin. This was a hallmark kata of the Goju style, and it chiefly involved a type of breathing where all of the muscles of the body were greatly tensed, and the breath was released slowly and

forcefully while the student was performing the moves such as blocks and strikes. Often, Eddie’s instructor, Mike, would take a wooden stick and hit Eddie in the abdomen as a means of testing the muscle contractions. The Sanchin kata could be HEARD because the breathing was so forced, that a raspy hiss was emitted by the student performing this kata.

John said “how’s it going – I mean, do you have it looking good yet?”

Eddie chuckled, because they both knew that it would take several months for the kata to look even decent. Kata training is like a battle – no, a war, because each part of the kata is a battle. The martial arts student is not merely performing a series of pre-arranged moves, like a dance. It is LIKE a dance, but there are differences. A kata is a fight, and in its most perfect form it is a life and death struggle, wherein the student is fighting against a number of opponents, and perhaps most importantly, against himself. All serious students of the martial arts come to realize and know this – the ultimate fight is with the self – yourself. The opponent, in its “highest” form shifts from the outside attacker, the “other,” to the battle against the student’s own being. The student has to become “one” with the kata: he loses himself in it, but not totally, because he must stay aware, to be “in this world” – a world that does include others. Mastering karate (and other arts), means, going beyond oneself and into oneself, at the same time. Kata is one vehicle for that artistic expression. Eddie related to John that the Sanchin kata had about forty-five moves, and that he had learned about half of them. John nodded his head in a kind of friendly commiseration.

John had visited Eddie’s karate class and saw first hand the

kind of tough class that Mike ran. Eddie had introduced John to Mike, and John discovered that Mike was familiar with John’s karate instructor. Mike had been exposed to the Shotokan system of Karate while studying in Japan.

John said, “well, you can be damn sure your sensei won’t let you slacken off – five months from now, your kata WILL look good!” John had used the Japanese word for teacher-“sensei” (pronounced sensay).

“You know I hope you’re right about that,” Eddie said somewhat less than fully confident. They both knew that kata were very tough and that it was quite possible that Eddie’s performance of the Sanchin kata would NOT look that good after five months. As a matter of fact, it might not look that good in a year. And, even if it did LOOK good in five months, or a year, that did not necessarily mean that Eddie’s rendering of the kata would BE good. A kata may look good on its surface when performed by a novice and when viewed by an inexperienced spectator. But only the trained eye of the instructor can truly discern if the student is performing the kata with full spirit and the total concentration that is required to win the war that the kata represents. Some of the hallmarks of a well done kata are serious exhaustion on the part of the performer, since a huge energy drain can be expected as a result of the “war” against the imaginary opponent(s), and the “war” against the self, and a look of satisfaction that the kata was indeed performed to standards expected by the performer him/herself.

It turns out that kata requires many years of serious training and devoted practice to even approach being performed in a quality manner. Eddie, although only a karateka, or student of karate, for a short period of a year and a half, had already sensed

that the mastery of kata (and there are approximately thirty kata in the Goju system of karate), might very well require a lifetime’s study.

Eddie and John finished their first mugs of beer, and they ordered another. John related to Eddie that in the Shotokan system of karate, there was no Sanchin kata as there was in Eddie’s style of Goju, but there were many interesting kata in his style. Shotokan, being a Japanese system of Karate, had many kata that were similar to those of Goju.

John was in the process of learning a kata with the name of Gankaku, which literally means “Crane on a Rock,” and it features the Crane stance, which requires that the student raise one leg, and place the ball of the foot of that leg on the knee of the other leg, thereby creating a position that resembles a crane or stork type bird. In this kata, the student is required to hold the crane-like foot position while simultaneously executing a side kick and back fist strike. Needless to say, it’s a very difficult position from which to attain any decent sense or appearance of balance. It is an advanced kata and is only taught to a student who has attained a good measure of proficiency in about five or six more basic kata. It is appropriate that a middle level green belt, such as John, be exposed to this Gankaku kata. In any event, the most important reason that John was learning Gankaku was that his instructor thought that John was ready to learn it.

Eddie was aware that John’s instructor was a very highly respected Shotokan practitioner who had studied his karate in Japan. John’s instructor had learned Karate from a legendary master of karate, who himself had studied with the founder of the Shotokan system, a man named Gichin Funakoshi. Eddie had

heard some seriously good things about John’s instructor from his own teacher, Mike, and Eddie knew that whatever John was learning, it had to be good. John and Eddie were comparing mental notes and thoughts on the similarities and differences of not only the kata, but also other aspects of their respective styles or systems of karate.

There was kumite (KOOMEETAY), or fighting. Shotokan and Goju were some what similar in their approach to fighting or sparring. Japanese karate systems generally accented a fairly linear approach to fighting, as opposed to the very circular nature of fighting that certain styles of Chinese kung fu accent or highlight. Of course, these are generalities, and both Eddie and John were starting to realize, slowly, that the way one does kumite, or sparring, often is more a product of an individual’s own creativity and personal style than of any overarching system.

Since they were only both green belts, or middle ranked students, they did not, nor could not fully realize the truth of the last statement in-that the individual must create his own fighting world (style), and should never simply be a “product” of ANY system of style. The student learns the system and absorbs the knowledge proffered by the instructor, but then, to truly reach new heights, he must put the stamp of his/her unique perspective on his/her actions, as evidenced by kumite. One mistake that can be made is to label any practitioner solely based on what style they have practiced. When fighting an advanced student in kumite, you have to take into account the unique nature of the person against whom you are sparring. Simply to label the opponent as “shotokan” may leave you open to many surprises, because what you might receive by way of an attack, could be devastatingly

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different than what you may have expected based solely on your vision of the opponent’s system. The opponent might always bring to bear moves and attacks that you didn’t expect, because that opponent is always more than just a system or style.

End of Free Excerpt.