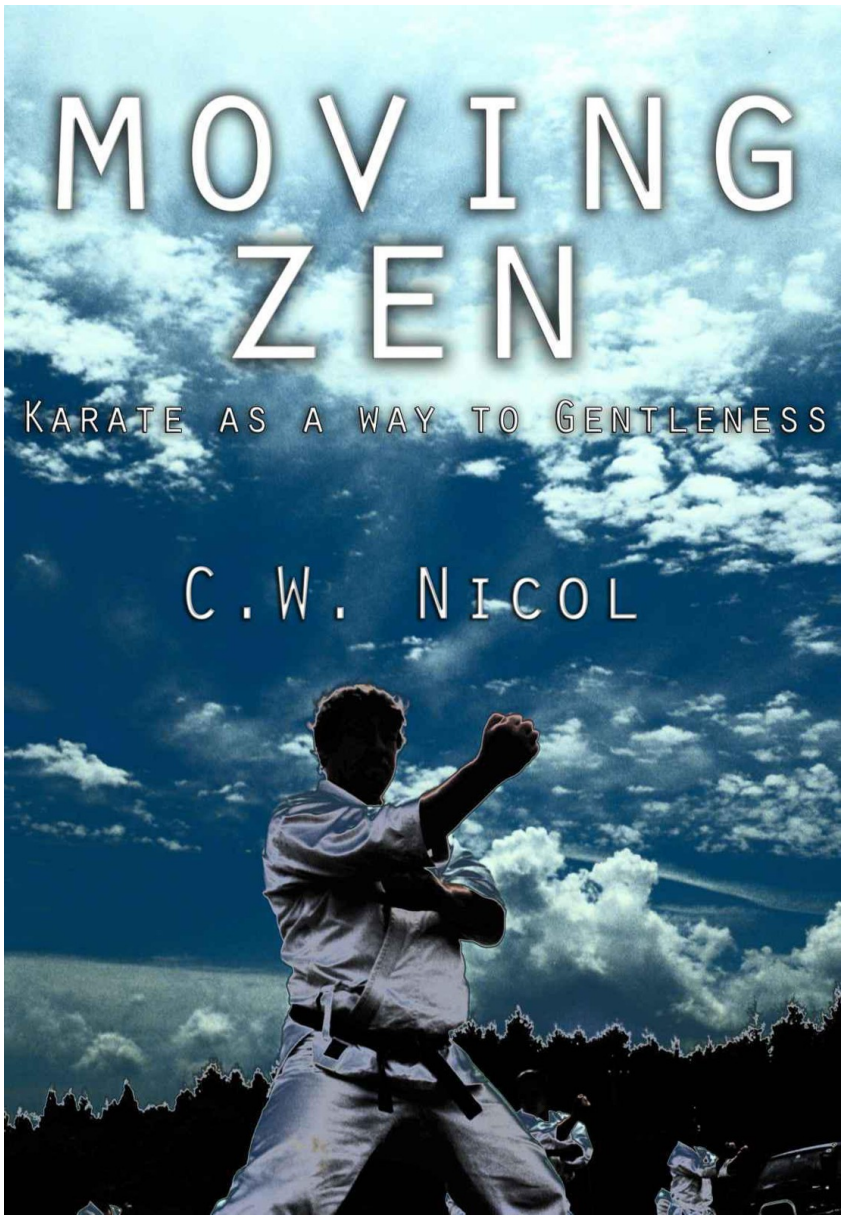


Moving Zen: Karate as a Way to Gentleness

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Table of Contents

# Chapter Two

Once outside the dojo, I walked, knowing that I had begun a very definite new chapter in my life, and in the understanding of this, I found myself more aware of the sounds and colors around me, some familiar-cars and buses and diesel fumes and trucks-hurrying housewives with their hair in scarves and shopping baskets in hand-ugly and impatient machinery noises of cars revving at stop lights, and the monotonous thump and huff of a smoke-snorting pile driver. I moved in a world of sight and sound, my skin still tingling from the cold shower after the workout, and my ears and eyes receiving all these things which were familiar, and others which were unfamiliar-like the squeaky warble of a noodle vendor's trumpet, as he pushed his steaming cart along the street-delivery boys in white jackets, balancing tray upon tray of hot food on one hand as they steered bicycles with the other-the unexpected clip-clop of wooden clogs on the sidewalk as a student strode down the street, the top of his high black uniform undone, hair cropped close to the skull, karategi slung nonchalantly over his shoulder by the neatly tied belt.

Beginning to study had brought upon me the realization that I was indeed in Japan, a country that I had read and thought about for so long. I stopped at a building site and watched the bow-legged, baggy-panted construction workers scramble like monkeys over the spider web trellises of rope and poles that they put up around the buildings they worked on. They were muscular, brown little men, with split-toed, rubber-soled shoes, festoons of rope pieces hanging from their belts, sweat bands of tied hand towels around their foreheads and woolen cummerbunds around their waists. One of them, stripped to the waist, had an intricate dragon tattoo that completely covered one bicep and shoulder - later I was to read that this tattoo was the mark of a member of a gang society, a yakuza.

I stopped, too, to gaze in fascination at the stalls of a fishmonger, to admire the delicate pallid red of the snappers, the steely wash and blue banding of mackerel, the gray of the flatfishes' upper sides and the astonishing white of their undersides, the mottled spots of squid, the boiled red of octopus and spiny lobsters, the silver sheen of herring and anchovy. There were fish that I had never seen before, all set around with a dozen kinds of shellfish, and, on a block, a huge red cube of whale-meat. The fishmonger was shouting boisterously, chiding and cajoling hesitant housewives, all the while working with the fast, deft strokes of his filleting knife. Sea smells, pervading the fumes of the street.

After a meal of curried rice, chosen and ordered by number from a small display window of plastic imitation meals, I made my way back to the Kodokan, where I rented a room on the third floor. The Kodokan is the headquarters of world Judo. It is a large modern building, with several dojos, offices, and rooms that are rented to students and visitors.

Judo had been my passion since I was fourteen and had joined a YMCA club in Cheltenham, England. In coming to Japan to learn the arts of the warrior, Karate and Judo had been most prominent in my mind. Of Judo, I knew a little, and had known where to come, but at the time I had studied in England, in the late fifties, there had

been perhaps one Karate teacher, only one, in the entire country. Now, twenty years later, this has changed, and Britain has dozens of Karate teachers. In coming to Japan, with a definite purpose in mind, I had gone first to the center of Judo, the Kodokan, and had been surprised, and pleased, that I could move out of the hotel room on the very first day, stay with a friend (Klaus, the German, whose brother I had gone to school with) for a few days, then move into my austere room in the Kodokan.

The room overlooked the Korakuen amusement park, and the din of loud music and fun machines rattled at my window. Disillusion. Shattered dreams of quiet dojos, wind in willow trees, sounds of trickling water in bamboo pipes. In the street, traffic roared, and a few hundred yards away the subway burst at frequent intervals, rumbling and rushing like an angry bear from its cave, to an open, raised subway station. Very convenient for getting to downtown Tokyo, but not for the fostering of dreams.

Alas, the room was Western and lacked the “tatami” or thick straw mats that the Japanese used in their homes. In the practice of Judo, I had two choices: either to receive instruction in the small, tatami-floored dojo that was set aside especially for foreigners, and only for foreigners, or to go upstairs to the big hall which was used by everybody for free practice. But I needed instruction. Going up to the big hall only meant that I would be a target for the young Japanese black belts who wanted to use a hefty foreigner to toss around. This was all very well, good perhaps to teach me humility, but when I went to Japan I weighed a hundred and ninety pounds, was very strong, knew a smattering of Judo and wrestling, and had just come off a year and a half of expedition life that made me as fit and determined as the next man. Second dans (degree black belts) tossed me around without mercy. My ankles were a mass of bruises from their hard foot sweeps. But the first dan black belts, the Japanese that is, were smaller than I, and I gave them a lot of trouble, often dragging them down to the ground and squeezing them into submission with the crudest of techniques. I wasn’t learning judo - “The Gentle Way” - I was beginning to learn how to make it awkward for other people to throw me.

One evening, in the foreigners’ dojo, just after I had fought and defeated a smaller man with a hold, a big Westerner took me aside and told me to demonstrate my forward rolling breakfalls. He wore a black belt, and I obeyed him. He watched for a while and then went over to speak to the Japanese teacher. Together they came back to me, and the Westerner, an American, said I should practice my breakfalls for a month, because they were bad. Breakfalls are the first thing a Judoka (practitioner of Judo) learns. What the man was telling me was that I knew nothing, even though I had just defeated a black belt. The American was kind, and told me that if I did not develop good basic technique now, I would never shake off my bad habits and style. He was right, but the Japanese teachers in the foreigners’ dojo did not seem to care, and I did not know enough to seek out my own instruction and discipline.

A little while later, while drying myself off in the changing rooms after judo, a burly Japanese man of about forty came over and talked to me. He said he taught Judo in Sapporo, Hokkaido, and asked me where I was from.

“I am from Britain,” I said.

He smiled. “Britain. Oh, good.” He pointed at my shoulders. “You are very strong.” He pointed to the white belt I had been wearing and then pointed back at my shoulders. “You come to Hokkaido. In six month I teach you good Judo and you get shodan.” I flushed with pride and asked many questions. Shodan? A first degree black belt in six months? That was worth thinking about! He gave me his card, and I thanked him and said that I would think it over.

I continued practicing both Judo and Karate, and stewed this over in my mind for a month. Then, one morning at the Karate dojo, I asked Takagi sensei how long it would take me to get a black belt. He looked up at me, stood, went from behind the desk and opened up the big cupboard where they kept the uniforms. He took out a brand-new black belt.

“You want this?”

I faltered, knowing that I had said something wrong. Then he threw the belt at me.

“Take this black belt and go back to your country.”

I had to backpedal, to explain. The Japanese do not refer to the black belt as such. They do not say “first degree black belt” as we do, conscious more of the outward symbol than of the intrinsic standard of skill. The Japanese say “shodan” or “nidan” and so on, meaning “first step,” “second step,” etc. Indeed, Judo and Karate men outside of Japan have adopted the Japanese vocabulary, for they have recognized this.

And yet, when Japanese dojo friends were posing for group pictures, they often tried to get me to wear a black belt, just for the photograph, but after that little lesson from Takagi sensei I resolved never to put on a black belt unless I won the grade, and I never asked again about a black belt.

By the end of the second month I had fixed a routine of living. Karate in the mornings. Lunch in the Yotsuya district, usually at a Chinese restaurant with Klaus and his friend Werner, or at a noodle shop with some Japanese friends. After lunch, a leisurely cup of coffee and half an hour of music and conversation. In the afternoons I went to practice Judo at Sophia University, the international university which was just the other side of the railway line and a short walk from the Karate dojo. The club captain had invited me to train with the Sophia University Judo Club every day, and I did, for it was smaller and more personal (and for me, a beginner, more instructive) than the Kodokan. In the evenings, I went back to the Kodokan and practiced there.

But things were not going well. Crowded Tokyo magnified my loneliness. In language and life-style, I lived apart from the people. I had not yet truly found a place to belong. Coming off an Arctic expedition, with its close and isolated companionship, did not

equip me emotionally for dealing with huge, alien crowds, or for the many people I had to know, greet and be friendly with.

I had a girlfriend in Australia who wanted me to go there. My family wanted me to go back to England. I was lonely. Should I give up this dream? It was not giving me the sense of place and purpose that I thought it would. But no, I decided to wait another few months at least.

And so the time was right to meet a man who would largely change my way of life. In fact I had already met him on the dojo mats. He was the big American who criticized my judo breakfalls. Donn Draeger, sixth degree black belt in Judo, sixth degree black belt in Jojitsu (stick fighting) and black belt rank in a dozen other martial arts. Tall, extremely muscular, upright, with piercing eyes and a quick, easy laugh, Donn is a most impressive man. He is also a very gentle man, quick to help a student, tell a joke when needed, help out a friend or a stranger.

I had just come in the front entrance of the Kodokan when I spotted an old acquaintance from Montreal, Doug Rogers (later to win a silver medal for Canada in Judo at the 1964 Olympics). Doug was talking to Donn Draeger, and I noticed something. Two burly Meiji University students passed the two foreigners, but before they went by Donn they bowed and greeted him as they would a Japanese Judo sensei. I stopped to talk with Doug and Donn, and after Doug rushed off to catch a train, Donn asked me how things were going. He listened with sympathy.

“Well, look here, Nic, we’ve got a house in Ichigaya, just a couple of stations down the line from Suidobashi. There’s a room there for you if you’d care to join us. We’re all here to study - Judo, Karate, stick and so on - so you’d be in with guys you could talk to. Look, drop by this evening, and take a look at the place.”

That evening I found my way up to the big old wooden house on Ichigaya hill. By a miracle, or a series of miracles, the house had escaped the fire bomb raids of the Second World War. It was one of the few Meiji period houses left in Tokyo, built about a hundred years ago when wood was more plentiful, when houses could be more spacious. Its basic design was Japanese, two-storied, with traditional rooms, sliding screens and doors, massive oaken beams and pillars, polished wooden corridors, alcoves hung with scrolls. The sitting room, however, was Western in design. It was during the period of the Emperor Meiji that the first real influx of Western thought and design invaded Japan, and it was evidenced here by this large, cold, dusty room with its Victorian furniture, European windows, heavy drapes and shelves. It was used as a gymnasium rather than as a place to sit, for everybody preferred the comfort and airiness of tatami mats and sliding paper screens - the shoji - that filtered the light and gave it a definite quality of softness and gentleness, of privacy without imprisonment.

Donn greeted me and made tea, in the Japanese way, with an iron kettle, in his room. He served the tea in precious bowls, which were stored carefully in little wooden chests. On a low Japanese desk were his typewriter and an unfinished manuscript. He has

written many books, and is reckoned by most to be the foremost Western exponent of martial arts. He had changed, as most Japanese men do, from his Western street clothes into a warm, comfortable garment called a “tanzen,” a man’s winter kimono, quilted, tied with a wide silk belt. In the alcove was a hanging scroll and a flower arrangement, and on the walls were racks of fighting sticks, clubs, training swords, and other close-combat weapons. We talked about martial arts, and about the best way for me, a beginner, to go about learning and living with them. I decided to accept Donn’s offer, and took a room in the house, sharing the facilities, responsibilities and rent. I moved my kit bag up from the Kodokan the next day.

Now, this was more as I had imagined living in Japan would be. I had the biggest room. It had no less than ten mats, and three sides of the room were windows, glass on the outside, and then a few inches of space, and then screens of wood and rice paper. I bought a low Japanese table, a Japanese mattress and quilts. I even bought a tanzen and a silk sash to tie it with. Now, in the evenings, I could retreat into the austere but airy beauty of my room, sip the roasted tea that I came to love, read a book, write a letter, think a thought. The hill was quiet, and the narrow lane that led up past the house was too narrow for any but the crazy kamikaze taxi drivers to drive fast on. The city whispered. It did not roar as it had in the Kodokan. In walking from the station I passed little carp ponds where Japanese men and boys went to pay their money, hire a bamboo rod, line, hook and bait, and then sit elbow to elbow and catch carp and goldfish to take home in plastic bags of water. I passed a few small bars, two coffee shops, a cake shop, greengrocer, fishmonger and butcher. The shop people began to recognize me and to call out the greetings of the day, and as I walked from the station I began to feel, if not at home, then at least in place.

The house was fine. It had a ponderous, somber grace. It faced out onto a garden landscaped with trees and stones and a little pond. It was surrounded by a high wall, over which the boughs of cherry and plum trees bent with artful intimacy. We even had a large, fat, resident toad, who sat under the house or by the pond, and looked upon life with the patience and mellowness of Buddha.

It took me only twenty minutes to walk from the house in Ichigaya to the Karate dojo in Yotsuya, and not much longer to catch a train to Suidobashi, just a short walk from the Kodokan.

I lived upstairs, as did Donn and another American called Bill Fuller. Bill was a second dan black belt in Judo and in Jojitsu, stick fighting. Downstairs were a couple of rooms that were used largely by transient martial arts students: Canadian, American, European, British.

We were all Budoka. It wasn't until I moved into the house on the hill that the word “Budoka” came to mean anything to me. Budo is the way of the warrior, and so “Budoka” is a student of martial arts, whether it be Judo, Karate, Aikido, Kendo, Kempo, Jojitsu or what-have-you. We are an elitist group. We are international. We fight and argue among ourselves but try to present a united front to the outside. But most

significant, the Budoka is a doer and a thinker. The Budoka is not a watcher, a spectator. In the house on the hill we Budoka shared tales, discussed training methods, argued. Donn Draeger was our “sempai” - our senior. I was by far the most junior in skills and, by a few years, in age, and Donn influenced me profoundly.

My own background was not pro-Japanese. My deep adolescent interest in things Japanese horrified my family. The British too are an island people, often closed in their thoughts, and they had been soundly and well beaten by the Japanese. Britain, in my youth, still resounded with tales of tortured prisoners, beheadings, jungle railways. Donn showed me a different side of the coin. He had fought in the Pacific war, seen friends die beside him on the beaches of Iwo Jima, faced and killed Japanese under circumstances of hate, and yet here was a man who loved and respected the Japanese, who understood that gentleness was the way of the warrior. Bigotry is left to those people on the fringe.

Once ensconced in my room, and at home there, I could take the first positive step toward a private and inward fight. At a nearby lumberyard I had a six-foot post cut and shaped for me. At the bottom it was four inches wide and four inches thick, but the back was cut away so that it tapered to only three quarters of an inch in thickness at the top. This tapering gave the board a little springiness, not too much, but enough to give a little under strong pressure. In a corner of the garden, hidden by walls and trees, I embedded the post in the ground, bracing it with large buried stones. Now the tip of the post came just above the tip of my solar plexus, and to this tip I secured a pad of hard rubber and canvas. This post and pad is an essential training device of a Karateka. It is called a makiwara. The traditional pad was plaited from straw rope, but it was some months afterwards that a teacher taught me how to make one. The straw rope pad is much rougher on the hands, and quickly develops calluses.

Over the following months I directed millions of foot-pounds of energy at this target. The canvas became flecked and mottled with blood when I punched poorly and grazed my knuckles. I used the makiwara every day. It was (and still is) a deeply personal fight. Nobody could watch me, see my little victories and defeats.

From the mind came power. In essence it was the mind that willed the leg to thrust, ankle to tense and root the foot to the ground, the hips to pivot, the punching arm to lance out and tense, twisting just on impact, while at the same time the opposite hand clenched and drew into the opposite side, and at impact the air was forced out of the body as all the muscles of thorax and abdomen tensed. For a given portion of each day, the makiwara target became the object of concentration, of focus. It was stationary, passive. It had dignity. In facing the makiwara, I had to become composed, just as later I would have to learn composure before a human opponent. My body was like a spring. I worked fifty punches on the right side, fifty on the left side, fifty right, fifty left. Breath inhaled as the spring coiled, exhaled as the fist contacted, smacking the board back. Thwock! Even in the winter I sweated at the makiwara. Each victory over my body, in delivering a good punch or a strike, was yet still a victory for the makiwara. It absorbed good and bad blows with impunity, and took its toll from me in skin, blood, and wrist

sprains. I faced it and worked. From the punching exercises I would shift stance and strike with the edge of my open hand-the “shuto” or knife hand. I would also strike with the edge of the closed fist, and with the back of the fist. I also tied a pad of canvas and sand to a stout old plum tree and used that for kicking. The muscles of the leg are so powerful that even a resilient makiwara could break with a well-focused kick.

The makiwara demanded a great deal of me, to stand thus alone, sometimes in the rain, sweating and striking, thinking and non-thinking, watching my form and trying to muster strength, speed and focus, hitting the pad so many times. Yet, though demanding, I found great peace in it. The target was simple, the conflict between nerve, bone, muscle, sinew, mind, rubber, wood and earth. Through my conflict with the makiwara I brought slow change to myself and without humiliation or change to the target. This training was not a mere pounding of fists, it was an exercise of concentration and release, it had rhythm, and the gradual building of awareness in timing, distance and strength.

In the Karate dojo in Yotsuya, there was a large sign in flowing black characters, the words of Gichin Funakoshi: “The ultimate aim of the art of Karate lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of its participants.”

In the matter of toughening the hands, I heard foolish advice at the Karate dojo; never from a teacher, mark you, but from a few of the black belts, especially the hard-headed, shaven-headed university toughs. It was said that the beginner should gather courage and smash his fist into a concrete wall. By doing this he would break the knuckles of his fists, and these would, in a few months, fuse into a hard, strong knot. That some beginners did this was evidenced by the blood on the wall outside the dojo. When I was told to do this I called the man a fool. You don’t have to be a doctor to know that this could create bad problems. Many times I saw young men with greatly enlarged knuckles that looked like awesome weapons, but which were, in fact, soft and tender even after a couple of years, for each hard strike renewed the old and serious injury to the tissues. To me my hands would never be degraded to a mere weapon. I would eventually develop to a point where I could decide, within myself, to give them weapon-nature, but then immediately afterward to return them to their other natures. I wanted to be strong, but I still wanted to be able to use a microscope, caress, type, and perhaps to play the guitar. And so, over a period of time, I built strength in my hands and wrists, and ignored foolish advice.

However, our garden wall was built of cement blocks, supported by reinforced concrete posts. When my hands grew stronger I began to strike at the concrete, and on one of the posts, at neck height, I wore a shallow white patch by repeatedly striking it with “shuto,” knife-hand (what outsiders call a “Karate chop”). To punch at the concrete with my clenched fist took more time and a lot of courage, but eventually I could do it. I had first to learn that strength was in the mind, and that if I wanted to avoid injury, I had to convince myself that my hand had become weapon steel, and not mere flesh and bone.

Months passed, and many things happened. I fell in love, began to learn the Japanese language, made friends, traveled a little in the country. But I had become stuck on a plateau, despite many hours of hard training. I began to feel very tired, and to ache each morning with minor bruises and sprains. Neither in Karate nor Judo was I progressing.

As I came into the dojo one morning, carrying the twin bundles of Karate and Judo uniforms, Takagi sensei stopped me, and pointed to them.

“What is that?” He was asking about the judogi, and I was surprised, knowing full well that nearly all of our teachers held black belt grades in both Judo and Kendo (fencing). I answered simply in Japanese.

"Sensei, it is my judogi. After the Karate lesson I will go and practice Judo.”

“A hunter who chases two rabbits at the same time will catch neither of them. Make up your mind. Do you wish to learn Judo or Karate? You are a beginner in both. They oppose each other within you. Your spirit is pulled in two ways. I have watched you. Gradually you are losing strength instead of gaining it. Judo is good, but you cannot learn both, Karate and Judo are too different. You do not progress here, and I think that you do not progress at the Kodokan either. Make up your mind.”

And then, looking back to the letter he was writing, he said no more to me.

Even though I loved it, I quit Judo, and devoted myself mainly to Karate. Oh, once in a while I would take my judogi and go to the Kodokan to fight on the mats, but no longer did I train at Judo. Up to this point I had been training six hours a day, and was losing weight and strength, but now, training only three hours, but with great concentration, I felt much better, and all the lingering aches and minor injuries healed.

While I was practicing one day, Takagi Sensei called me over to the dojo door. I bowed out.

“You still have not taken the examination for eighth kyu. Why is this?" The eighth and seventh kyu still only entitled the holder to wear a white belt.

“Eighth kyu has no meaning for me,” I answered.

He became very angry and shouted at me. “Each rank in Karate has meaning, and each Karateka must grasp the meaning of those ranks. You will open your eyes before you sit up and raise your head, crawl before you walk, and walk before you run. You must take the examination on Sunday.”

“Yes!” I bowed and shouted the reply. A Karateka does not answer his teacher with a small and weak voice.

“Go now and practice the form. You are too high and weak in the hips.”

“Yes!” I shouted.

Other more senior students glanced at me and smiled. It was amusing, and perhaps gratifying to see the Britisher shouting out his answers in Japanese.

“Nic! Do not stand and be lazy, get into the dojo!” This time it was Sasaki, my teacher, senior and friend. He was merciless.

I took the examination on the Sunday, and not only passed, but jumped to seventh kyu grade. I still wore a white belt, but the next step would be to green.