

THE CAT'S EERIE SKILL
A TRANSLATION OF ISSAI CHOZAN'S
"NEKO NO MYOJUTSU"

Karl F. Friday

Turbulence and combat are a part of the lives of all creatures. From the smallest to the greatest, no species is utterly free of violence, least of all man, who has learned to kill not only for food or for self-defense, but in anger or hatred, for profit, and even for pleasure. Yet this creature, man, using the same hands with which he fashions tools of destruction, creates art that celebrates life; using the same mind with which he plots rapine, conceives philosophies that celebrate peace and harmony.

Among the myriad solutions mankind has proposed for taming its savagery none is as intricate or intriguing as the cultural and conceptual traditions surrounding the Japanese practice of the *bugei* (the military disciplines, or, more popularly, the martial arts). In late medieval and early modern Japan, martial training appropriated the status — as well as the forms, the vocabulary, the teaching methods, and even the ultimate goals — of religion and the fine arts. By the eighteenth century they had evolved into a complex cultural phenomenon in which various physical, technical, psychological, and philosophical factors were believed to intertwine and interact to produce a coherent path that guided both the physical and the moral activities of those who followed it.

The intricate entanglement of tactical, corporeal, mental, and spiritual concerns lies at the heart of classical Japanese martial art, and yet it is often only poorly understood. Scholars and aficionados alike have long been intrigued by the compelling paradox of samurai martial culture and its equation of perfection of the arts of violence with perfect non-violence. But to resolve this enigma, modern observers have

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tended to fall back on simplistic notions like an unattaching "Zen mind" that transcends and neutralizes the moral consequences of killing.¹

While this idea is not entirely wrong, it misses a critical point: to the early modern samurai, proficiency in combat and spiritual enlightenment were not contending, or even sequential, achievements; they were interactive and interdependent developments — inseparable aspects of the same phenomenon — to be experienced simultaneously. It was, by this time, a fundamental premise of bugei instruction in Japan that the ability to utterly transcend any attraction to violence was *essential* to the perfection of combative skills. Pundits, drawing out the implications of a world view (formed at the nexus of Buddhism, Taoism, Neo-Confucianism, and Shinto thought) that stressed monism and the interpenetration of all things and all actions, were insisting that the study of fighting arts not only could but *must* eventually become a path to broader development of the self.²

One of the best illustrations of the reasoning that underlay this conclusion is Issai Chozan's eighteenth-century parable about the nature of ultimate proficiency in the fighting arts, *Neko no Myojutsu* ("The Cat's Eerie Skill"). Issai, whose real name was Tanba Jurozaemon Tadaaki, was a retired retainer of the Sekiyado domain in Shimosa Province (in what is now Chiba Prefecture), and a prominent scholar of Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and military science. He published *Neko no Myojutsu* in 1727, when he was sixty-nine years old, as part of a thirty-volume work entitled *Inaka Soji* ("The Country Chuang Tzu").³

The text centers on a discussion among a group of cats, concerning their failure to defeat an unusually ferocious rat. Issai uses the cats' skills and shortcomings as illustrations of successive levels of achievement in martial ability.



NEKO NO MYOJUTSU

There was once a swordsman named Shoken, whose home was invaded by a huge rat that would appear and run about, even in broad daylight. Closing the rodent up in one room, he set his house cat to capturing it, but the rat charged, leaped at the cat's face, and bit her, causing the cat to squeal and run away. Nonplussed by this result, the swordsman borrowed several neighborhood cats who had made names for themselves as extraordinary rat-catchers, and turned them loose in the room. But the rat sat quietly in a corner until one of the cats approached, whereupon it leaped out and bit him. Seeing this terrible sight, the other cats froze with fear and could not advance.

The swordsman became enraged and, taking up a wooden sword, went after the rat himself to beat it to death. But the rat slipped beneath the wooden sword untouched, while the swordsman struck sliding doors and Chinese paper screens, tearing them to shreds. That spirited rat bound through the air with lightening-like speed, and even leapt at the swordsman's face, attempting to bite. At length, drenched with perspiration, Shoken summoned a servant. "I have heard tell," he said, "of a peerless cat about six or seven leagues from here. Borrow it and have it brought here."

The servant dispatched a man. But when he returned with the cat, the animal did not look especially clever, nor did its body appear in any way remarkable. Be that as it may, when the cat was placed in the room, the rat did not move from its corner, while the cat walked nonchalantly across the room, caught it, and dragged it back to Shoken.

That evening, all the cats assembled in the swordsman's home, with this Elder cat in the seat of honor. The other cats came forward, kneeled, and said, "We are all felines of some reputation, long-trained and skilled in this art. Not only rats, but even weasels and otters, we slap down and carve up with our claws. But we have never heard of anything like this ferocious rat. Through what skill were you able to bring it down? We humbly beseech you to share with us your wondrous art."

The Elder cat laughed and replied, "You are all young kittens. Although you are experts in your work, you have not until now heard tell

of the methods of the true Way. And so when you meet with the unexpected, you are taken unaware. Nevertheless, let us first hear of the extent of each of your training and practice."

A shrewd black cat came forth from the group. "I was born," it began, "to a house of rat-catchers and have set my heart on that path. I can leap over a seven-foot folding screen or squeeze through a tiny hole. I have been unsurpassed in speed and acrobatics since I was a kitten. I can feign sleep or inattention, and have never failed to catch rats even when they run along the roofing beams. And yet today I faced a rat of unimaginable prowess, and was defeated for the first time in my life."

The Elder cat replied, "What you have mastered is rehearsed form. Thus you cannot escape your calculating mind. The ancients only taught technique in order to show the Way. And so their techniques and forms were simple and few, and yet they contained within them all the ultimate principals of the art. In this later age, many pursue technique and form exclusively, somehow or other putting together various tricks and mastering cleverness, while never equaling the prowess of the ancients. They use their talent, and contest one another in form and technique, but even the zenith of cleverness amounts to nothing. The small man, who perfects technique and concentrates on skill, must always be thus. Skill is the use of the body and the will, but it is not based in the Way. When one focuses on cleverness one falls into deceit, and often one's own skills and tricks are turned against oneself. Reflect upon this and learn it well."

Thereupon a large, tiger-striped cat stepped forward. "To my thinking," it said, "martial art requires the ability to move with *ki*.⁴ I have, therefore, long practiced breathing exercises. I have built up my *ki* so that my *tanden* is firm and full — as if it reaches from Heaven to Earth.⁵ I strike down my enemies with this alone, securing victory even before I advance to fight. I seize rats with it, answering their every attempt at change of tactic, just as the echo answers the voice it follows. I have no conscious thought of employing technique, and yet technique bubbles forth spontaneously. I can strike down rats running along ceiling beams just by staring at them; and then I take them. But this

mighty rat came forth without form and left nothing in passing. What is one to make of this?"

The Elder cat rejoined, "You have trained at harnessing the impetus of your vital energy, but you count only on your ego. This is not the Good in the true sense of the Good. You go forth ready to shatter the enemy, and he comes forward to shatter you; what happens when he cannot be shattered? You seek to dominate and crush him and the enemy seeks to dominate you; what happens when he cannot be dominated? Why must it be that your will will always be strong and your enemies' always weak? The power that you think fills Heaven and Earth is but a representation of the real *ki*. It resembles Mencius' 'flood-like *ki*,' but it is not the same.⁶ His is vigorous because it carries perspicacity; yours is vigorous because it is carried by your might. Thus its application is likewise different. It is like the main currents of the Yang-tze and Yellow Rivers or the might of a single night's flood. What happens when an enemy cannot be bowed by the force of your *ki*? It is said that a cornered rat will turn to bite a cat. He fights for his life, trapped, and with no other hope. He forgets his life, forgets his desires, and thinks only of the battle. He thinks nothing of his body. Thus his will is like iron. How can such an animal be made to submit by the force of one's *ki*?"

And then a gray, somewhat aged cat came quietly forward to speak. "As you say, though *ki* may be vigorous, it has portents. And that which has portents, however faint, can be detected. Thus I have long disciplined my heart such that I do not overawe or struggle; I harmonize and do not oppose. When the enemy is strong, I yield tranquilly to him. I engulf his technique like a curtain enveloping a stone thrown against it. I offer even the strongest rats nothing to fight. And yet this rat today neither bowed to force nor complied with yielding. It came and went like a ghost. I have never seen the like of this."

The Elder cat said, "What you are calling harmony is not a natural harmony; it is a contrived harmony. You seek to evade the enemy's attacking spirit, but when there is even the slightest presence of mind on your part, the enemy can perceive it. You self-consciously attempt to harmonize, and your spirit becomes muddled and lazy. When one acts

out of forethought, one obstructs one's natural perception. And when one obstructs one's natural perception, sublime actions cannot come forth from anywhere. But when one follows one's intuition, without thinking and without doing, one has no presages. And when one has no presages, one can have no enemies under Heaven.

"But this is not to say that all of what you have trained at is of no value. If the Way permeates all its manifestations, all actions hold ultimate principle within them.⁷ The ki activates the functions of the body. When the ki is magnanimous, it can harmonize with all things without limit. When the ki is in harmony, one ceases to fight with force, yet is not readily broken even when striking metal or rock.

"Nevertheless, where there is even a speck of self-conscious thought, all becomes artifice. This is not the naturalism of the Way. Therefore those you face do not capitulate, but become antagonistic. What sort of art should one use? Only be selfless and respond naturally.

"The Way has no ultimate. You should not think, from what I have said, that I have reached the zenith. A long time ago there was a cat in a village near mine. It slept all day long and showed no vigor of spirit. It was like a cat carved of wood. No one ever saw it catch a rat. And yet wherever that cat went, there were no rats nearby. It was the same wherever it had been. I went to it to ask why this was, but it didn't answer. Four times I asked and four times it gave no answer. It was not that the cat was ignoring me, but that it did not know *how* to answer. It did not know how it did what it did. What is known is not said, and what is said is not known. This cat had forgotten self and others. It had returned to a state of nonentity.⁸ It was like King Wen of Chou, who attained divine warriorship, and killed not.⁹ I am still far from attaining the level of that cat."

Shoken had been listening to these words as if dreaming. He then came forth and bowed to the Elder cat, saying, "I have long studied the art of the sword, but have not yet reached the ultimate in that path. But, having heard your ideas this evening, it seems that you have attained complete mastery of this path of mine. I beg of you: show me the inner secrets."

The cat replied, "Nay, I am a mere animal; rats are my food. What do I know of human activities? But one thing I once furtively overheard is that swordsmanship is not just about striving for victory over others. It is, in a phrase, the art that looks upon the profound and clarifies life and death. One who would be a samurai must always train in this art and nurture this will. Hence one must first permeate the principles of life and death, never deviating and never wavering, using no cleverness or thought, keeping one's heart and ki in harmony, without distinguishing self from others, and being undisturbed like the depths of a spring. Thus one will adapt and respond spontaneously to change.

"When the faintest thought of entities enters one's heart, there is relativity. When there is relativity there is an enemy and a self, who can confront one another and fight. In this state [one cannot] respond freely and spontaneously to change. One's heart has already fallen into the realm of death and lost its brightness of spirit; how can one stand and fight clearly in this state? Even if one wins, it would be but an accidental victory. This is not the true objective of swordsmanship.

"This state of nonentity should not be equated with an arrogant vacuity.¹⁰ The spirit is originally without form; it stores no things. When it hoards anything at all, the ki will be drawn to that place. And when the ki is drawn to anyplace at all, adaptability cannot function unrestricted. It goes too much where it is directed, and it does not reach where it is not directed. Where there is too much, one's strength overflows and cannot be stopped. Where it does not reach, it starves and cannot be used. It cannot respond instantly with changes. The formlessness of which I speak holds nothing and is drawn to nothing. In it there is no enemy, and there is no self. It only responds to what comes, and leaves behind no tracks. The *I-ching* says, 'Without calculation and without artifice, being still and unmoving; this is what enables one's senses to penetrate all under Heaven.'¹¹ One who studies swordsmanship in light of this principle is close to the Way."

Shoken then asked, "What is meant by 'There is no enemy, and there is no self?'"

The cat answered, "There is an enemy because there is a self. Where there is no ego, there is no enemy. Enemy is simply a name for

something in opposition, like yin to yang or fire to water. Wherever there is form there must be opposition. When there is no form in one's heart, there can be nothing to oppose it. When there is nothing to oppose one, there is no fight. Thus there is no self and there is no enemy. When one forgets both self and other, becoming like the undisturbed ocean depths, one is in harmony and at one with all. Although one strikes down the enemy's form, one is not conscious of it; nor is one unconscious of it. One is without deliberation and moves only with one's instincts. When one is completely unattached to all thoughts, the world is one's own world, and one makes no distinctions between correct and incorrect, or like and dislike. All these come from the line between pain and pleasure or gain and loss in one's own mind. Heaven and Earth are expansive, and yet there is nothing to be sought after outside one's own mind.

"The ancients said, 'When one's eyes focus only on dust, the Three Worlds seem shabby and narrow; when one's heart is carefree, one's whole life is rich and abundant.'¹² [This means that] when even a speck of ambition enters one's vision, one cannot keep one's eyes open. This happens when things enter into a place that was originally clear, and empty of things. This is an allegory for the mind and spirit. [Mencius] said that in the midst of millions of enemies, even though one's body can be crushed to dust, one's heart is one's own. Even a mighty foe cannot control one's mind and spirit.¹³ Confucius said, 'Even a common man cannot be robbed of his will.'¹⁴ If one is confused, this very mind aids one's enemies.

"This is all I have to say. Only reflect on it and seek yourselves. A teacher can only transmit the technique, and shed light on the principle. To realize the truth of it is in oneself. This is called 'acquisition through direct experience.'¹⁵ It may also be called 'mind-to-mind transmission,' or 'transmission outside the teachings.'¹⁶ This is not a matter of turning one's back on the teachings, for even the teacher cannot but convey them. Nor is it only Zen. From the lessons of the sages to the goals of the arts, all acquisition through direct experience is 'mind-to-mind transmission' and 'transmission outside the teachings.' The teachings themselves are only to point out what is already in

oneself, albeit invisible. One does not receive such knowledge from a teacher. It is easy to teach, and easy to listen. But it is difficult to find what is in oneself and to make it one's own. This is called 'seeing reality.'¹⁷ It is like rousing from an erroneous dream, and thus may also be called 'awakening.' There is no difference between these terms."

1727, sixth month, second day
Edo, Nihonbashi, Shinagawa-machi
Shojudo



In this compelling allegory, Issai describes the highest form of fighting ability as something beyond the achievement of physical skills, tactical brilliance, and even psycho-spiritual power. He identifies absolute, flawless proficiency in combat as a state in which one rises above all possible opponents by deactivating all possible opposition. The ultimate warrior is one in such perfect harmony with the natural order that he transcends both any interest in fighting and any need to fight.

This state is, however, qualitatively different from the sort of benign pacifism through strength commonly envisioned by modern, especially Western, martial art aficionados. The latter, exemplified by David Carradine's character in the popular 1970s television series *Kung Fu*, centers on the dismissal of aggression and ego, and on the deliberate avoidance of conflict. The consummate warrior of this ideal renounces war.

But in the classic Japanese ideal, a perfect warrior is still a warrior, performing the functions of a warrior, just as the master cat described in the parable was still a functioning cat. The cat kept its neighborhood free of rats, even though it did no overt hunting or killing. In the same way, bugei philosophers like Issai did not advocate abandoning the world and repudiating violence, the way a monk does, but *mastering*

violence and becoming able to defend the realm and serve justice without needing to actually fight.

In *Neko no Myojutsu*, Issai not only characterizes what perfect martial skill involves, he illustrates why this must be the case. The cats of the parable describe increasingly sophisticated approaches to martial art, yet each approach is inherently and irredeemably flawed.

The swordsman's house cat appears to have relied on its physical strength and speed alone. But, Issai warns, no matter how strong or how fast one is, there will always be someone stronger or faster — as Shoken's pet quickly learned. This is precisely the reason that warriors develop martial arts and train in the first place: conditioning and the application of well-conceived tactics can enable relatively small or slow fighters to defeat larger or faster ones. The second cat in the parable had reached near-perfection of skill at this level. But, reminds Issai, while physical skills and tactical cunning give one a significant edge against most opponents, the very best will not be taken in; some will even find ways to exploit these devices to their own advantage.

A more sophisticated alternative to relying on either brawn or brain is to focus instead on developing sufficient psycho-spiritual presence to be able to dominate and overawe opponents into submission by sheer force of will. This is the line of attack favored by the third cat in Issai's tale. Becoming able to crush opponents with the power of one's spirit makes it possible to transcend corporeal limitations — for the spirit, unlike the body, need not weaken with age or illness. It also robs adversaries of any way to discern or anticipate one's stratagems — for there are none to be discerned. There is, therefore, an appealing mystique to fighting in this manner. Nevertheless Issai dismisses this as a relatively unreliable, and low-level, approach to combat. A more sophisticated method yet, is to focus not on overwhelming the opponent, but on yielding to him — deflecting all opposing force, and flowing around it like water in a stream. This gives opponents nothing to strike at, and leads them to defeat themselves. But even this, says Issai, falls short of perfect skill in martial art, for at this level non-violence is still an artifice that can be detected and exploited by an opponent.

Through the voice of the Elder cat, Issai argues that to reach the ultimate in combative skill — to place himself beyond all possibility of defeat — a warrior has to eliminate all self-conscious thought or guile, and act spontaneously, in complete harmony with Nature. Only by doing this can he free himself from reliance on physical, mental, or spiritual tools, and the risk of meeting an opponent who is better with them.

This premise is easy enough to understand, but the ramifications of accepting it are profound. For the desire to fight, to win, to see justice done, or even to survive are all manifestations of self-conscious thought, and all must be transcended in the quest for perfect martial art. And thus a journey that begins with a craving for certain victory must, if followed to its logical end, take one beyond outcomes, beyond fighting, and beyond even the self.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Cleary, *The Japanese Art of War, or King, Zen and the Way of the Sword: Arming the Warrior Psyche*.
- 2 Excellent introductory discussions of premodern Japanese cosmology appear in Kitagawa, *On Understanding Japanese Religion*; Grapard, "Religious Practices"; Bitō, "Thought and Religion, 1550–1700" and Najita, "History and Nature in Eighteenth Century Tokugawa Thought." For more on the relationship between cosmology and bugei thought, see Karl Friday with Seki Humitake, *Legacies of the Sword*, especially chapter 2.
- 3 Watanabe (7–8). Chuang Tzu was a Taoist philosopher and the author of a fourth-century BC collection of parables, anecdotes, and other moral lessons that bears his name. The complete text of *Neko no Myojutsu* is reproduced and annotated in Watanabe (10–16); the translation that follows is based on this version. A heavily paraphrased English translation of the text — missing several passages — appears in Suzuki (428–35).
- 4 Ki, or *ch'i* in Mandarin, denotes the universal and fundamental energy that, according to Sino-Japanese physiology, circulates within all living things. English-language discussions of the concept of ki and its application to Japanese martial art and other physical activities appear in Yuasa, *The Body, Self-Cultivation and Ki-Energy*, and Friday, *Legacies of the Sword* (153–55). Helen Hardacre, *Kurozumikyo and the New Religions of Japan* (20–21), offers a brief, but illuminating discussion of ki as the term is used in modern Japanese culture and by Japanese religions.
- 5 The tanden (*tan-tien* in Mandarin; literally, "cinnabar field") is an important center for the collection and manipulation of ki, according to traditional Sino-Japanese physiology, said to be located approximately three centimeters below the navel. "Heaven and Earth" is a poetic metaphor for one's head and feet — that is, for one's entire body. The text uses the phrase "*tenchi ni mitsuru*" (literally, "filling Heaven and Earth") to describe the act of making one's ki reach from one's head to one's feet.
- 6 *Hao-jan chih ch'i*, or *kozen no ki*, in Japanese. *The Book of Mencius* describes this phenomenon as follows:
 "May I ask what this 'flood-like ch'i' is?"
 "It is difficult to explain. This is a ch'i which is, in the highest degree, vast and unyielding. Nourish it with integrity and place no obstacle in its path and it will fill the space between Heaven and Earth. It is a ch'i which unites rightness and the Way. Deprive it of these and it will collapse. It is born of accumulated rightness and cannot be appropriated by anyone through a sporadic show of rightness. Whenever one acts in a way that falls below the standard set in one's heart, it will collapse."
- 7 The phrase used here, "*doki ikkan*" (*tao-chi i-kuan* in Mandarin; literally, "the Way and the Vessels interpenetrated"), is an important Neo-Confucian construct that derives from a passage in an appendix to the *I-ching*, or *Book of Changes* (see note 11, below), known as the "Appended Statements" (*Hsi-tz'u ch'uan*, Japanese *Keijiden*) or "Great Commentary" (*Ta ch'uan*, Japanese *Daiden*) Part 1, Section 12: "What is above shape is called the Way, what exists under shape is called the vessels." An excellent translation of the entire passage appears in Rutt, 419–20.
- 8 *Mubutsu*, literally, "no-thingness." The phrase, "return to non-entity" (*mubutsu ni ki su*) comes from the *Lao-tzu* (also known as the *Tao te ching*), chapter 14.
- 9 Confucian tradition looks to the ancient Chou dynasty (?1122–770 BC) as a period of perfect governance, when the world was as it should be, and to King Wen (r. ?1099–1050 BC) as its most exemplary monarch. Wen was said to have the courage and martial fortitude of a god; his realm was always orderly and righteous, and yet he never needed to raise armies or kill enemies. The term rendered here as "divine warriorship" (following Suzuki, 432) is *shinbu*, a term of fundamental importance in Japanese bugei philosophy that might also be rendered as "divine valor," "true martial art," "spiritual martial power," or "sacred martialism." In its fullest sense, it describes the condition that holds when all the essential principles of martial art are put into application.

simultaneously and in proper balance. It represents, in other words, the summation of idealized martial art. The term was being used in this context in Japan for many centuries before the advent of organized martial art schools. For more information, see Friday, *Legacies*, 63–65.

- 10 The cat is arguing here that non-entity (*mubutsu*) is a desirable, real-worldly thing that differs from the "arrogant vacuity" (*ganku*), the withdrawal from the world, preached by Buddhism.
- 11 The *I-ching*, or *Book of Changes*, is an ancient text of unknown origins. Cherished by both Confucians and Taoists, the text consists of explanations and commentaries on sixty-four hexagrams that symbolize the various states of Existence. Tradition holds that either the legendary King Wen (see note 9, above) or the Duke of Chou (r. 1042–1036 BC) wrote the main text, while Confucius added the commentaries, but modern scholars do not agree on when or by whom the book was produced. For details on the history of this text, see Rutt, 5–144.
- 12 The source of this quotation is unknown. "The Three Worlds" is a Buddhist term, referring to the three levels of existence: the world of desire, the world of form, and the world of pure spirit. In general, it indicates the entirety of the environment that living beings experience as part of life and death.
- 13 This sentence is a rather loose paraphrase of a sentence from the passage quoted in note 6, above.
- 14 This quotation comes from *Analects*, Book 9, Section 26. The full passage states, "The Master said, "The Three Armies can be deprived of their leader, but a common man cannot be deprived of his will." The phrase, "Three Armies," appears in several places in the *Analects*, and seems to refer to an articulated force, with three wings, each under a separate commander, trained to carry out complex tactical maneuvers, such as encirclements and flank attacks. Mencius is drawing a parallel between the commander-in-chief of such a force — the "mind" of the army — and the will of an individual, arguing that the latter is inalienable. (Translation by

Brooks and Brooks, *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors*, 106.)

- 15 *Jitoku*, literally, "self-attainment," or "self-acquisition." Buddhists use this term to describe the learning of something through the experience of actually doing it.
- 16 'Mind-to-mind transmission' (*ishin denshin*) and 'transmission outside the teachings' (*kyōge betsuden*) are Zen Buddhist constructs referring to immediate insight into the nature of reality, based upon a student's immediate experience of that reality, guided there by his teacher.
- 17 'Seeing reality' (*kensho*, literally, "seeing nature") is a Zen Buddhist expression that describes the experience of awakening or enlightenment, similar in meaning to *satori*.