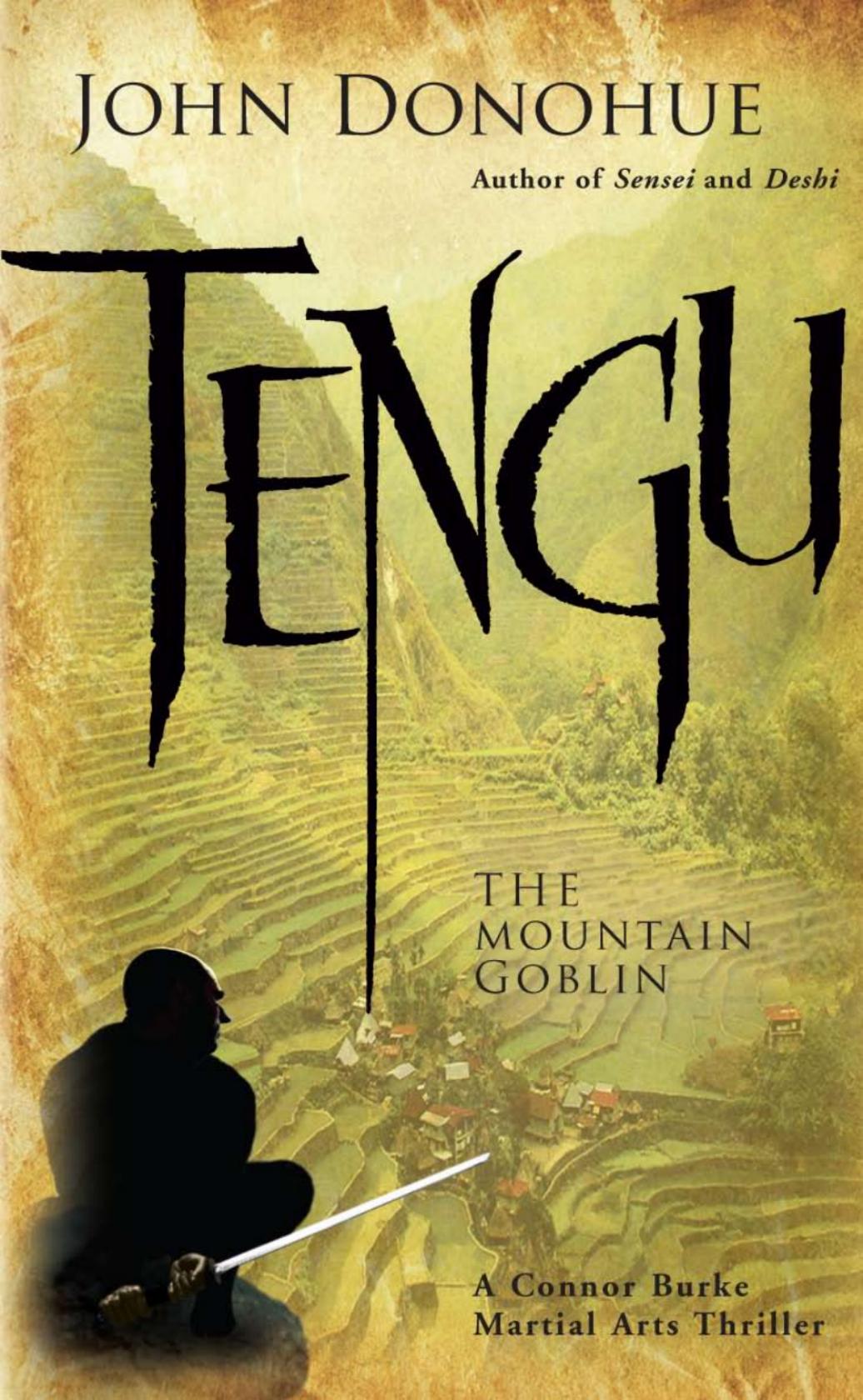


JOHN DONOHUE

Author of *Sensei* and *Deshi*

TENGU



THE
MOUNTAIN
GOBLIN

A Connor Burke
Martial Arts Thriller

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THE
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GOBLIN

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Prologue

DEMONS

A famous physicist once said that it's impossible to examine the world objectively: The very act of looking disturbs the gossamer filaments that bind the universe together and, as a result, they vibrate with unanticipated harmonics. Our mere existence changes everything.

We move through life thinking that the distinction between ourselves and others, between ourselves and the world, is absolute. The Zen masters know better. We are linked in ways that are both intimate and fearsome.

I have come to believe that this is so. I don't think I could ever have anticipated the events that would have brought me somewhere far from my home, facing death beside the one person I most admired in the world. Looking back, it is as if we were drawn to that place by a chain that, for all its invisibility, was stronger than the steel of the sword that my master taught me to wield.

Our progress through this world sets the sea of molecules in motion. Like tide or wind, our very passage through the world creates unseen patterns in the fabric of life. They churn and swirl. Some fade away into quiet; others spawn into things of a size and monstrous intensity we could never imagine.

These, ultimately are the demons that haunt us. They are not some force from out there—they are creatures of our own making. They grow, sometimes without our awareness, spinning off into

the darkness, until the day their orbit brings us once more into collision.

The old teachers were men alive to the currents that swirled around them. Human storm cells themselves, they churned through life with an intensity that de-stabilized the system. And they knew this. So they searched the darkness, aching to divine the pattern of the cyclones that moved, just beyond the limen of consciousness. The power they sensed was something to harness, something to defend against. Something to fear.

The *sensei*, students of both motion and stillness, know that the quest for mastery and control creates new currents, new powers, and new challenges.

These challenges become tests that some survive. But all too often, only the bystanders remain to tell the story.

Yet, the melancholy dignity they have passed on to those who follow in their footsteps is this: together, we can face the looming force in the darkness and not flinch.

1

BURN

The snow burned. It had fallen and frozen into granules overnight, an early dusting of white that hissed across rocks, coiling in the wind like a snake.

Higashi's normally well-manicured hands were red and raw. He slipped as he scrambled across the stone bridge and cursed himself under his breath for being foolish enough to come out here. It was so unlike him to take the risk. He typically lived a life of tight control in a carefully constructed world of his own. But there was a fascination for him in actually seeing this subject, an intense fixation on this man, because Higashi's discovery of him was important in ways no one else had suspected. Now his city shoes gave him no purchase on the icy patches, smooth and uncaring, of the pathway. He could feel the cold working through the thin soles, drawing the warmth from his feet, making him clumsy.

He was not a field agent. He spent his days reviewing logs of phone and e-mail intercepts, a vast blizzard of paper spewed out by the intelligence service's computers. He sifted through fragments of conversations; small pieces of life caught and held up for inspection, pulsing with ghostly implications. Higashi's brain stored and dissected facts, seeking the threads of a connecting web so faint and fine that too heavy a touch could snap it. And when he twisted and turned the data, playing the light just so, a pattern was sometimes revealed. Then, alone in his analyst's cubicle, he would sigh. When

he did, the noise of satisfaction, so loud in the hushed scrubbed air of the office, made him glance about guiltily, afraid that his small expression of triumph would be enough to make the web dance with alarm.

Usually he moved slowly, with the cool circumspection of a man who lived most vividly in his head. But, as a man whose subjects were typically beyond Japan's borders, he also grew obsessed with the possibility of this time seeing the suspect with his own eyes.

But there was more to this ambition than he cared to admit. His life was spent working tiny shards of information, hint and innuendo, teasing them into some sort of meaning, a mosaic of blurred boundaries and indeterminate shapes. His father, while he had lived, had hoped for a son who could do more. The old samurai adage that to know and to act were one and the same thing rang through Higashi's childhood. His father, who had early detected a dreamy remoteness in his son, hoped that the rigorous training of the judo *dojo* would pound some sense into the boy.

Even years later, Higashi would shudder involuntarily at the memories of body heat and the scent of sweat, the sound of bodies being pounded flat. It was a world of danger, where people came at you with moves as unpredictable as they were unrelenting. Higashi dreaded it. His father, on the other hand, was a short, squat man in a worn *gi*, who would shuffle onto the tatami mat with the subdued swagger of a man at home in a brutal element. He could not understand his son, and the young Higashi realized with a sinking feeling that he could never meet the expectations of his sire.

The slight and hesitant Higashi was easy prey for the other boys in the class. He went through the motions, learned the moves, but was never able to marshal the fierce, tight explosion of effort that led to success on the judo mats. And in Japan, the nail that sticks up gets banged down. Higashi's time in the judo *dojo* became an exercise in futility and humiliation. Eventually, even his father

came to realize it. Higashi never forgot the ill-concealed look of disappointment on his father's face.

Higashi worked hard to compensate. His obvious intelligence permitted him to distinguish himself in his studies. If his father could never quite fathom his bookish son, he could at least take pride in his academic success. But Higashi's penchant for living in his head often made him tone deaf to the nuance of social relations that were so important in getting ahead in corporate Japan. Eventually, and only through his father's connections, he landed a job as an analyst in the security agency.

And now he was on the cusp of being able to discover something remarkable. It was rare that the pieces all fit together, and he yearned to see it with his own eyes. It was a validation of his skill and an opportunity to prove himself. It was something that all the field agents had missed. All the young, tough men who had the same confident swagger as his father. The compelling reason that had ultimately spurred him to leave the safety of his desk was bigger than ambition, more potent than intellectual curiosity. All too often it was the operations agents, not the analysts, who got the credit. In their dismissive attitude toward the analysts, Higashi relived his childhood humiliation. He burned with resentment that he could never be like them, and yet hungered for their recognition. Now, he believed this one safe sojourn into the field would show them—show them all—that he was worth their respect.

Higashi didn't breathe a word of his plans to anyone.

The notice of a special Winter Training event—a *Kangeiko*—was flashed across Higashi's computer screen by the customized search protocol he'd written. Special winter training was common in January and February all over Japan. Martial artists in white uniforms would practice barefoot in the snow, faces ruddy in the wind and bodies steaming with effort. The very thought of it made Higashi shudder. He was not a man accustomed to extremes. But

this special event's listing held a name that ultimately pulled him out of the office, onto the train, and into the wooded hills of a rural temple.

The grounds of the temple should have been soothing to someone like Higashi. They were rustic, yet orderly. A weathered *torii* marked the entrance to the precincts. Traditional wooden buildings were set among the trees and a large flagstoned plaza was cradled in the bowl created by surrounding hills. The wind whipped through the gray tree branches. Pines clung to the slopes, dark blotches against the frosty hues of winter.

He had shuffled into the temple grounds with the small crowd of spectators to watch the demonstration of the *ko-ryu*, the old styles of martial arts. Higashi was nondescript: slight, with his belly starting to swell into the soft middle age of a desk man. His clothes were respectable, but worn looking, his black hair shaggy and unkempt. His small hands were clean and the nails kept fastidiously short. He was a man out of his element. But he wasn't there because of his affinity for the martial arts. Far from it, he was there to put a face to the name of the man he had studied in secret for so long.

Higashi edged closer to the ropes that separated the crowd from the martial arts masters, mouth slightly open with the effort of solidifying the essence of what he knew into the person who stood before him. A lumpy form, bundled in the traditional clothes of old Japan, Higashi's subject was surprisingly agile for a man his age. Higashi saw the man's focused expression, the force of breath that pushed, steam-like into the air, and the whir and snap of ancient swordplay as the old master went through his routine.

Higashi was not a man attuned to others. But even someone more sensitive would have been hard pressed to note the minute surge in awareness on the part of the old swordsman. His eyes were slitted with concentration, shielded by high cheekbones and

brow. They flickered once toward Higashi as they registered the vibrations of acute interest coming from the nondescript man in the dark overcoat. Then the whirring arc of steel claimed the old master's whole attention once more.

There were other demonstrations after this, and Higashi wandered the grounds of the temple, partly in an attempt to keep warm, but also hoping to catch a glimpse of his quarry once more. The afternoon sky began to fade to gray with the approach of evening. Higashi was increasingly alone as his shoes crunched along the gravel pathways, lost in thought about the old man, reviewing what he knew, rehearsing the presentation he would make to his superiors.

He looked up with a start at the harsh call of a crow. Alone on the hillside, he could hear the wind and the dry clacking of tree branches. He turned around quickly, sure that someone was on the path behind him. But he saw no one. He focused his attention back down the slope. Hidden by the curve of the land, karate students were exercising in the distant courtyard. He could hear the bark of their cadences bouncing along the hills. And when he looked down the curving path as it dipped into a hollow, the trees seemed to close ranks, crowding in on the trail and blurring its boundaries in the waning light.

He stuck his cold hands in his coat pockets, hurrying back the way he had come, his report forgotten. The brilliance of his investigative triumph seemed suddenly unreal and unimportant. He was now just a man, alone on a winter hillside, cold, and suddenly jumpy. He walked quickly toward the temple, activity masking a growing unease. A more experienced man would have heeded the visceral message his body was sending. A field agent would have known that fear, like cunning, springs from a primitive reflex for self-preservation. Higashi the analyst knew little of cunning. He was learning more about fear.

Lost in his reverie, he had gone far up the slopes. The hills were networked with paths that meandered by scenic overlooks and small clearings. In these spaces, tiny, ancient dolmens listed sadly off their uprights, like forgotten, exhausted travelers. Higashi, lost, walked faster, his head swiveling, eyes hungry for a familiar landmark. He was convinced that he heard footsteps in the woods behind him. But when he looked, there was nothing, just the looming trunks of trees, the wind, and the distant chorus of *kiai* from the karate students in the valley. He felt the hair on the back of his neck rise and he fled down the hill.

His face was slick with sweat. The path dipped down into a dark place. A small rocky streambed glinted with ice. He hurried across a small stone bridge, looking down to keep his footing. He slipped and fell anyway, righted himself and then hurried across the icy place, casting another terrified look behind him.

He ran headlong into the trap.

The old man emerged from the trees along the path, his robes one of many archaic shades living in the hollow of the hills. He stared at Higashi with a fire that halted the younger man in his tracks.

“Who are you?” the old voice hissed.

“Sumimasen,” Higashi apologized, ducking his head and spinning around to flee.

“Yame!” the old voice ordered. Higashi felt powerless to withstand the command. Like a man caught in a nightmare, Higashi turned to face the old master. He trembled in fear and cold.

“I must know,” the old one croaked, and removed a weapon from under his robes. It was a *suruchin*, a fine chain with a small weight at either end. He held the loops of the chain in his left hand and spun a short length in a tight circle with his right. The chain made a deep whirring sound in the cold air. Higashi was shocked into movement by the sound of the chain. He jerked forward in despair, hands held out like claws.

The chain whipped out, and the weight smashed into the ridge of bone where the nose met the brow. Higashi grunted and sunk to his knees, stunned and bleeding. The old man rewound the chain and watched Higashi impassively. Then the chain snicked out again, smashing into the younger man's cheek. Higashi could taste the blood in his mouth. He spit out a fragment of tooth. In shock, all he could think was how cold and hard was the ground on which he knelt, as cold as the old eyes that bore into him.

He cried out involuntarily as the old man swarmed toward him, but his cry was mixed in with the echo of the *kiai*, the shouts of the karate trainees in the courtyard. Higashi held up his hands defensively. They were beaten away. He tried to rise, but was slammed into the ground and had the wind knocked out of him. He lay stunned and disbelieving, his eyes wide, retreating into innocence. He regretted coming. He yearned for the safety of his cubicle, the ordered ranks of files under his control. He closed his eyes in the hope that, when he opened them, the old man would be gone. Like a bad dream.

When the fine chain looped around Higashi's neck, his eyes jerked open. He was dragged into the woods. He kicked feebly and tried to choke out a protest against the relentless and irresistible force. But no one heard.

Higashi recognized this man in an elemental way. He had the same hard eyes as those judoka from so long ago, the sheer physical presence of his father. It sparked a brief flare of resentment and resistance. Higashi knew what the old one was up to: his contacts abroad and the skills he was selling.

By the time he was finished with the interrogation, the old one knew what he wanted. He worked the nerve points with a casual brutality, his short, hard fingers jabbing, grinding, bringing fire to the last moments of Higashi's life. The analyst gasped and burned, largely powerless to resist the heat of questioning. But even then,

Higashi's mind whirred with a fading spurt of dispassionate analysis. His last coherent thought was that he was glad he had made a complete copy of the file and mailed it to his father. As if to say, here, this is what I've done, finally.

It was the one secret he was able to keep from his murderer. One final triumph on the rocky slope that Higashi's failing senses confused with a judo mat.

In the end, the old one simply snapped Higashi's neck, backing away with an odd fastidiousness as Higashi's muscles spasmed and then relaxed, a stain of urine spreading under the corpse.

The old man melted into the trees, his compact form moving silently through the gloom. In the distance, the *karateka* called together. Their voices echoed in the twilight, bouncing in cadence around the hills, strong, united, and purposeful. Alone in the forest, Higashi's body steamed slightly in the cold air, his eyes open to the sky. The trees creaked in the wind, branches rubbing together and making small noises like hurt animals. Far away, a crow called in distant protest of the coming dark.

2

ZANSHIN

Rain whipped against the high windows of the training hall—hard pellets cast by an angry hand. Inside, students knelt along the hardwood floor of the *dojo*. The room was silent except for the distant noise of wind and weather and the dry rasp of Yamashita's feet as he moved to the place of honor at the head of the room.

He moved with a fluid certainty, settling down into the formal sitting posture known as *seiza* with the soft inevitability of snowfall. Yamashita Rinsuke had been my *sensei*, my teacher, for twelve years, and I had seen him do remarkable things, but the simple spectacle of everyday actions was enough to show me that I was in the presence of a master.

In the martial arts, the really good teachers cultivate in their students an acute sensitivity to various stimuli. Your nerve endings are teased and jolted, your reflex actions made more subtle, and, for some of us, the result is a change in the ways we see the world and exist within it. The true masters are both brutal and refined, compassionate torturers, and guides who lead you to places where you will stand alone, confronting age-old fears that snarl in the abyss.

Once you've gone into that void and come through to the other side, it changes you. You glimpse it sometimes in people who've had a similar experience. I see it in my teacher's face in his rare unguarded moments. And I see it in the mirror. It doesn't make us better than other people, just different.

This day for a fleeting second, as he knelt, I saw something else in Yamashita's expression. It puzzled me. I knew he was displeased with the progress of the afternoon's class, but I didn't think that was what I had detected. My teacher wore a mask during class time—his shaved head swiveled on a thick neck and his eyes were dark holes in a face that regarded his students with silent comment. I've come to be the same way. This afternoon I thought I saw something unusual behind his eyes. It lasted a micro-second, almost like a gap in concentration—what they call *tsuki* in the martial arts—an elusive scent wafted away on a breeze, forever out of reach. Maybe I was imagining things; I know from experience that Yamashita's focus is impeccable. I let the thought go and settled myself, ready for whatever came next.

Lately, Yamashita let me guide the classes. Senior students often do this in the martial arts, but this was a new development for my teacher. His *dojo* was an exclusive one—you didn't get past the door without already having earned a few different black belts and carrying some strong recommendations from people Yamashita knew and trusted. He demanded a great deal from his pupils and they asked for a great deal back, so having his senior student lead the training had not been the practice in the past.

But things change. Some time ago, I had knelt before my teacher and received the ceremonial tokens of my status as *men-kyo-kaiden*. It's the highest level of rank Yamashita awards and I'm the only one of his students who has lasted long enough to get it. And it was not just that I had endured the training. I had been tested. I had faced the fear of a fight to the death and had survived. I mean that literally. As I had bent to bow to him during the ceremony, an old wound burned down my back, the reminder of a slashing sword cut and an experience that had taught me that true commitment—to the art, to life—came with a price. Sometimes I wonder whether it was a challenge I could meet again.

Now as I teach, he watches the students as they move through their exercises. He watches me, as well. His gaze is hard and he misses nothing. I watch too, working to correct and guide, but my ability pales besides that of my *sensei*. It's not that I'm not good, just that he is so much better.

I was working with a new group of students, trying to get them to grasp the subtle difference between what we do in Yamashita's *dojo* and what they had been used to in other schools. They were only half listening, and I thought I knew why. I don't look the part of a *sensei*. For one thing, students seem much more willing to believe in an Asian instructor. There's a type of reverse discrimination going on here. Deep down, many martial artists got started in their disciplines because of a fascination with the Mystic Arts of the Far East, and they're still expecting their teachers to be little Asian men with wispy beards in flowing robes. I'm a bit of a disappointment to them. Not only am I not Japanese, I'm not even physically imposing. Average height. Dark hair. Blue eyes. My nose has been broken a few times. Years ago a distant relative from the Old Country told me that I had "a face like a Dublin pig," and things haven't changed much since then. And I was not Yamashita.

But Yamashita's *dojo* is a place where you get what you need, not what you want. He himself is a bit of a surprise. Asian, but not wispy. He's a dense howitzer shell of a human being. He prowls the practice floor like the burly predator that he is. He speaks in an elegant, curt manner with a precise pronunciation that many of his more senior students unconsciously begin to mimic. His hands are broad and the fingers thick, his forearms corded with the strange muscles of the swordsman. So I didn't feel bad that the novices thought I was decidedly second-string. Standing next to my teacher, most people are.

These new students were from various aikido schools and, while it's a nice art, like most systems of fighting it conditions you to do

some things extremely well and to do other things not at all. They were all *yudansha*—black belts—and were skilled at the techniques of their system. Some came from the mainline aikido schools that were still connected to the founder's family. A few were from the harder variants promulgated by disciples who founded their own styles of the art. They all had the fluid movement and propensity for direction shifts and other disorienting moves that would let them dominate an opponent. Executed well, these techniques are effective. But the process of learning them, of repeating the same pattern over and over, of dealing with a choreographed response and a looked for result, creates a type of mind-set that Yamashita detests.

People, as my master has taught me and my experience has proven, are unpredictable. Our techniques are grounded in the commonalities of movement and possibility inherent in the human form, but there are always surprises out there. No matter what you expect to happen, you need to stay open to the possibility that things may not turn out exactly as you planned. It's a commonplace insight, but one that needs to be absorbed deep into your muscles, because to overlook it is to court disaster.

I had worked with the students on some variants of a very basic technique they knew as *ikkyo*. It's a defense to an attack that can come in different forms—a grab or a strike—but that ends with the attacker immobilized through an evasive maneuver that unbalances and distracts the opponent, leading him to a point where the joints are manipulated into an angle that violates normal human kinesiology and he's subdued. With students at this level of proficiency, the action is smooth and fast. Partners flow in a blur, swirling into the inevitable success of the technique. It's great, as long as the attacker cooperates.

But what if he doesn't?

I knew only too well that a desperate opponent will do the unexpected. The white scars I have on my hands are a fading reminder of

a skilled lunatic who almost took my life. The fear and pain of that battle sometimes returns unbidden late at night and I am haunted by the memory of rain and death on a wooded mountain.

I was trying to impress upon the trainees the importance of real focus and a more elusive quality called *zanshin*. It means “remaining mind,” and different teachers use the phrase in different ways. For Yamashita, *zanshin* is the quality that preserves you from losing sight of the unpredictability of life—and of your opponent. We train long and hard to focus on an attack or a technique—to give it everything we’ve got. But the effect of *zanshin* is the development of an awareness that is both inside and outside the moment. Commitment with flexibility. Balance while flustered. Creativity in chaos.

When my students started to flow into their *ikkyo* routine, I continually encouraged them to stay grounded in the technique, but not to lose themselves in it. It sounded contradictory even to me. The point I was trying to drive home was that they shouldn’t be so confident in what they did. They needed to stay alive to the possibility that the opponent would not respond as they had come to expect, that the opponent wouldn’t lose focus or balance, or flinch from the distracting *atemi* blow that was intended to set up the technique. It was hard to get through to them. They were more confident in themselves than they were in my ability to show them something new.

Yamashita finally called the group to order, seeing that alone I couldn’t get the point across.

He regarded the class. They sat quietly; a few mopped sweat off their brows with the heavy sleeves of their *keikogi*. Many of them had just gotten the dark blue practice tops Yamashita has us wear. They are dyed a deep indigo and when new, the coloring comes off on the skin. I watched the students and smiled inwardly as they created faint blue smudges on their faces. It was a rite of passage we all experienced during our first months here.

Outside, a gust of wind pushed against the building—you could feel the subtle change in air pressure. Winter was upon us. Yamashita's head swiveled to take in the sitting row of novices. His thick hands lay in his lap, palms up and fingers curled slightly, dangerous looking even in rest. He spoke quietly and you had to strain to hear him over the sound of the rain on the roof.

"When we train," he said, "we must strive to go . . . beyond ourselves. To see more than what lies on the surface. So." He gestured with one hand and rose to his feet. He stood in the *hanmi* ready posture familiar to these *aikidoka*. "Familiar technique is a good friend, *neh?*" He flowed in a swift pantomime of the actions in the *ikkyo* technique. Immobilization of the attack with the left hand—a hip twist to off-balance the attacker—the distracting blow—then the finish, as smooth and certain as the downward flow of a current. He finished and looked at us. "But if you lose yourself in the technique, you . . ." he brightened as he came up with the finishing phrase, ". . . lose yourself. Do you understand?" Some heads nodded hesitantly. Others frowned to show him that they were thinking.

Yamashita looked about and sighed. "Sometimes what appears to be our friend can be our enemy. To be so certain that a technique will succeed is to court disaster." He looked eagerly about at the class. They had all been training for years in various *dojo*. Maybe that was the problem. Some schools were tougher than others, but they were all schools. People tended to cooperate with one another. It cuts down on injury and made sure that everyone could make practice again next week. But it wasn't real fighting. The whole point in real fighting is to make sure that the other guy doesn't make practice next week, or maybe ever again. And that's a hard lesson to teach someone.

"So," he concluded and gestured to me. I stood up with an inward sigh. Serving as my teacher's demonstration partner is a

regular part of what I do, but it does induce high degrees of wear and tear and I'm not getting any younger. But today I got a reprieve. Yamashita gestured again to another student, a *godan*—fifth degree black belt—in aikido who had some of the most fluid moves we had seen that day.

“*Ikkyo*,” he ordered. He didn't bother to identify who was attacker and who was defender. We were all experienced enough to know that the junior member always defends. Which meant that I would attack. We set ourselves and I looked for a brief moment at Yamashita, trying to figure out what exactly he wanted out of me for this demonstration.

He looked right back at me and his glance was the same cold, severe look he gave everyone on the *dojo* floor. “Take the middle way, Burke,” he told me.

My teacher is not someone who believes in making things easy.

The whole thing works like this: The attacker reaches out with his right hand and grabs the collar of the defender. So I did, and the *godan* flowed right into the routine. He grabbed my wrist with his left hand while swiveling his hips so as to pull me forward and off balance. Then his right hand came around to smack me in the head and distract me, which should have set me up for the technique.

It's based on a simple premise: it's difficult to stay balanced and centered when threats are coming from either side of you simultaneously. The conventional wisdom is that you either opt to stay upright or block the strike, but you don't do both. At least most people don't.

But Yamashita has trained me to different expectations. I had learned by personal experience that there are people who can defend against things simultaneously. So you'd better learn to deal with it. Which was the whole point I was supposed to drive home to the *godan*.

He grabbed me and did the hip shift. I just extended my right arm through him, following his movement. His *atemi* shot out quick and crisp, a blur on the periphery of my left side. It was a good serious blow and I would have seen stars if it had connected. I liked that about the guy—he was doing this as hard as he could and had enough respect to know that I was capable of dealing with it. It was a shame what I had to do next.

The whole point of the demonstration was to reveal how inadequate his technique was. It's a hard thing to do to someone who's probably got over a decade invested in the move and the system that spawned it. But Yamashita is not in the illusion business. He believes in the underlying unity of everything that's effective and exhorts us to meld functionality with esthetics. Sometimes the result is as graceful as the swoop of a bird. Sometimes you are as subtle as a train wreck, but always your opponent should be the one left in the rubble.

The *godan* was used to dominating people through superior grace and technique. He wasn't used to someone like me. He shifted to draw me off-balance and I drove in to join him. The hand he tried to immobilize loosened its hold on his collar and sought his neck instead. His diversionary strike was hard and fast, but I slammed it away with my left forearm, and I saw the quick wince of pain tighten the skin around his eyes.

That flash was all I needed. I struck him a few times—a chop to the neck, a wicked elbow jab to the solar plexus. It happened too fast for me to bother to register. Then I was behind him, and I strung him out and dumped him hard on the floor. In the real world, you give the shoulders a little English as they go down—it makes the head bounce when it hits. But he was new to Yamashita's school and I tempered my throw with a touch of mercy.

He could fall pretty well, but the thud still echoed in the room. Outside in the murk, thunder rolled in mocking imitation. I came

around to the *godan's* side and looked in his eyes to make sure he was okay. They focused on me all right, and the look on his face was not pretty. I gave a mental shrug and helped him up. To survive in this *dojo*, you must learn to let go of some pride—no hard feelings, just hard training.

Yamashita glided up to us. “So. To assume a technique will work is to provide your enemy with a weapon to use against you. I have made Burke do this thing,” my teacher turned to look at the class, making sure that the point he wanted to make was heard. Many of them were eyeing me warily. “In time, you will come to know him. His technique is . . .” he waved a hand as if to show what had just taken place, “as you see. But he sometimes holds back and does not push hard enough.”

His students, I thought, or himself?

“Burke is a humane man,” Yamashita continued. “It is a great gift. But each of us needs to balance mercy with . . . efficiency. The proportions are mixed differently in each of us. And we struggle for balance. Listen to him. Train well. Ultimately, you will find him a good teacher.” Then he looked at me, his eyes dark and glittery in the lights, like the flash of stormy weather that was held at bay by the *dojo* walls.

“You must push them, Burke,” he told me.

“Yes, *Sensei*,” I bowed.

By the time class had ended, night had arrived. The rain came in waves, the distant drumming echoed in the murky night. Yamashita and I went up to the loft portion of the *dojo* where he had his living quarters. The training floor below was dark, and the soft lights from upstairs gave you a sense of warmth and comfort.

My *sensei* left me in the sitting area. I heard water running as he filled a pot. “I will make something hot to drink,” he called to me from the kitchen. “I have a new blend you will like.” I smiled to myself. Coffee was one of Yamashita’s obsessions. He was like a

mad alchemist and fussed over the process of brewing with all the attention and precision he brought to life in general.

“Where’s it from this time?” I called. Last Christmas, I signed him up for monthly deliveries of something they called “new kaffe.” So far, we’d sampled the produce of Jamaica, Madagascar, and a variety of other places that Yamashita delighted in pinpointing with the aid of a huge hardbound *National Geographic* atlas. He sits with the atlas splayed across his lap, stubby fingers tracing the contours of the countries in question. At those times, he looks like a happy child.

“Peru,” he answered when he finally came in. He set a square wooden tray down and poured me a cup. It was an act of courtesy and hospitality on his part. I had come to look forward to the ritual. My teacher would invite me up. We would drink coffee, letting the smell and the steam wash against our faces. And I would see another side to this complex man.

I looked at his cup. There was a tea bag in it. “You’re not joining me, *Sensei*?” It was unusual.

He smiled tightly. “This evening, Burke, I have a desire for something soothing.” He picked up a spoon and fished the bag out. I could smell the mint.

“Is something wrong, *Sensei*?” I remembered the transient glimpse of trouble I had seen earlier in his usually stoic face.

Yamashita sipped at his cup, his eyes almost closed. He set the cup down and sat back, hands on his stomach. Then he looked at me. “I wonder, Professor,” he replied, pointedly ignoring my question, “how the *godan* felt about the lesson you gave him?”

I shrugged. “He probably wasn’t too happy. But you were right. It needed to be done.”

“So,” he said and sipped at his tea again. “As a teacher, it is difficult to know when a student is ready to hear something, *neh*?” I nodded in agreement. “This is perhaps one of the hardest things to

gauge.” He held up a thick hand and balled it into a fist. “When to give,” he opened the fingers of his hand toward me, “and when to withhold,” the fist formed again.

“How do you know when the time is right?” I asked my teacher.

He smiled. “Sometimes, you sense it. Or see it in a student’s movements.” He looked at me for affirmation. I nodded. We had both experienced this with trainees. Then Yamashita smiled. “Other times, you guess.”

“Do you think he was ready for that lesson?”

“Time will answer that question,” he said. Then he grew solemn. “Time . . .” he said, and appeared ready to go on, but the phone interrupted him. I got up and went to answer it.

“Hello?”

“You makee lice?” a screechy voice demanded.

“What!” I said, momentarily flustered. Yamashita looked up inquiringly at the tone of my voice.

“Yeah,” the voice continued, “I’m interested in kung-fu lessons.” Then the evil cackling started.

“You idiot,” I told my brother Micky.

The voice on the phone became normal, more recognizable. “Yeah, well, I tried your apartment and got no answer. I figured you’d be there.”

“What’s up?”

“You comin’ tomorrow?” Micky asked. It was his wife Deirdre’s birthday and the entire family would descend on his house like a cloud of Mayo locust.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I told him. “Why?”

“No reason,” he told me pleasantly. Which was a lie. Micky was a cop and when he asked questions, it was for a reason. His conversation had all the subtlety of a chain saw. I promised I’d be there and we hung up.

“Your brother the detective?” Yamashita said. His eyes glittered in the lamplight. I nodded. “He wishes to see you,” he stated in reply. It was not a question. He sat there quietly, watching me.

I lingered over the last of the coffee, but Yamashita never picked up the thread of the conversation that had been interrupted by Micky’s call. I knew my teacher well enough to know that it wasn’t that he had forgotten, rather that he did not wish to pursue it right now. My *sensei* doles out knowledge on a timetable known only to himself. I had learned to accept it. I finished my drink and then I said goodnight. None the wiser about what was disturbing him, I returned home tired, but uneasy. Off in the distance, muted thunder rolled across the heavens and the air pulsed with an energy that, although unseen, made the skin along my shoulders and neck tingle in trepidation.

**“A gem amidst the gravel bed of thrillers
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