

The Subtle Art of a Cat

Neko no Myōjutsu 猫の妙術*

Issai Chozan 佚齋樗山 (1659–1741)

*This translation is based on an English version of Karlfried Graf Dürckheim's seminal German rendering, "Die wunderbare Kunst einer Katze". Dürckheim received the text from his Zen master 寺本丈晴 Teramoto Takeharu. Teramoto-sensei belonged to a Kendo lineage where this story had been handed down from master to master since the beginning of the seventeenth century as a secret teaching. Drawings by Klaus Bertelsmann.

The story of “The Cat’s Eerie Skill” (Neko no Myōjutsu) is found in a traditional book of swordsmanship secrets called Inaka Soshi 田舎莊子, written by Issai Chozan in the 18th century. Chozan was a samurai in Sekiyado Domain and was well acquainted with Shintoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, with particular knowledge of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. This story was valued by Tesshu Yamaoka and hardly shared with anyone even within the same school.

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a master of combat called Shoken. His house was plagued by a big rat. It ran about even in broad daylight. One day Shoken shut the room door and gave the household cat an opportunity to catch the rat. But the rat flew at the cat’s face and gave it such a sharp bite that it ran off screeching. Evidently the creature couldn’t be got rid of so easily. So the master of the house collected together a number of cats that had won a fair reputation in the neighborhood and let them into the room. The rat hunched itself up in a corner. As soon as a cat approached it, it bit the cat and scared it off.



The rat looked so nasty that none of the cats dared to take it on a second time. That put Shoken into a perfect rage. He went after the rat himself, determined to kill it. But the wily beast escaped every blow and feint from the experienced master; he just couldn't wear it down. In his attempts to do so, he split doors, shojis, karakamis, and so forth. But the rat flashed through the air like lightning, jumped up at his face, and bit the master. At last, running with sweat, he called out to his servants: "They say that six to seven blocks from here there is the toughest and cleverest cat in the world. Bring it here!"

The servant brought the cat. It didn't look so very different from the other cats. It didn't look particularly sharp or bright. So Shoken didn't expect anything special from it. But he thought he would try it all the same, so he opened the door and let it

into the room. The cat entered very softly and slowly as if it was expecting nothing out of the ordinary. But the rat recoiled and stayed motionless. So the cat approached it slowly and deliberately and carried it out in its mouth.

That evening the defeated cats met in Shoken's house, respectfully accorded the old cat the place of honor, paid it homage and said humbly: "We are all supposed to be highly efficient. We have all practiced and sharpened our claws in order to defeat all kinds of rats, and even weasels and otters. We had never suspected that there could be a rat as strong as that one. But tell us, what art did you use to vanquish it so easily? Do not keep your art a secret. Let us into the mystery." The old cat laughed and said: "You young cats are indeed efficient. But you don't know the right way to go about things. And so when something unexpected happens, you're unsuccessful. But first tell me how you have practiced."

A black cat came out to the front and said: "I come from a line of celebrated rat catchers. I too decided

to become one. I can jump over screens two meters high; I can force myself through a tiny hole that only rats can negotiate. From the time I was a kitten I have practiced all the acrobatic arts. Even when I wake up and I still haven't quite come to, and I see a rat scampering across the balcony, I get it straightway. But that rat today was stronger and I suffered the most frightful defeat that I have ever experienced in my whole life. I have been put to shame."

Then the old cat said: "What you have practiced is only technique (技法 *gihō*), sheer physical skill. But your heart (*kokoro* 心) is preoccupied with the question: 'How am I going to win?' And that problem is still consuming you when you reach the target. When the ancient masters taught 'technique', they did so in order to show their pupils a 'means of the way' (道筋 *michisuji*). Their technique was simple yet contained the highest truth. But posterity has been preoccupied with technique and technique alone. In that way much has been discovered according to the rule: if you do this or that, then this will happen. But what does happen? No more than dexterity—

skill pure and simple. The traditional way has been abandoned; much ingenuity has been applied to an exhaustive pitting of technique against technique, until we have indeed reached the point of exhaustion. We can go no further. That always happens when people think of technique and success and put no more than ingenuity into play. Ingenuity-cleverness is however a function of the heart; if it is not based on the Way and aims at perfect skill, then it falls victim to error and what has been achieved is lost. Think about this and practice from now with earnest devotion (with *kufū* 工夫, in Chinese, *kung fu*).

At that a big tabby-cat came forward and said: “In the art of fighting it is a matter of the energy (*ki* 氣), and it must always be so. Therefore I have always cultivated my energy. As far as I am concerned, my energy always seems as hard as steel and free and charged with the presence of the Energy that fills heaven and earth (Mencius). As soon as I can see an enemy, he is already vanquished; no sooner do I see him than he is thrall to that mighty Energy

and I have already won the battle in advance! I do so quite instinctively, as the situation demands. I move according to the feel of my opponent; I take the rat from the right or the left as I wish and I anticipate my adversary's every move. I never worry about technique as such. It happens of its own accord. If a rat runs across the balcony, I have only to stare at it for it to fall into my clutches. But the rat of which we are speaking comes without shape or form and goes without leaving any trace. What does that mean? I cannot say."

Then the old cat remarked: "What you have been concerned with is, of course, the effect of that great Power that fills heaven and earth. But what you have actually achieved is only a mental power and not that good power which serves the name of Good. The very fact that you are conscious of the power with which you intend to conquer prevents your victory. Your ego is in question. But what if your adversary's ego is stronger than your own? When you try to overcome the enemy with the superior force of your own power, he pits his own power against yours. Do you

imagine that you alone can be as strong and that all others must be weak? The real question is how to behave when there is something that in spite of all one's willing one cannot defeat with the superior weight of one's own power. What you experience as 'free and tempered' and 'filling heaven and earth' within you is not the great Power itself but only its reflection in you. It is your own energy, and therefore but a shadow of the great Energy. It appears to be the great power, but in reality it is something quite different. The energy of which Mencius speaks is strong because it is permanently illumined by great understanding. But your energy obtains its power only under certain conditions. Your power and that of which Mencius speaks have different origins. They are as different from one another as the eternal flow of a river, for instance the Yangtse Kiang is from a sudden downpour one night. But what is the energy that one should rely on when faced with an enemy who cannot be conquered by the mere power of your energy (*kisei* 氣勢)? That is the real question! There is a proverb that says: 'A rat in the trap will even bite

the cat.' When the enemy is in the jaws of death he has no resources to depend on. He forgets his life, he forgets all need, he forgets himself; he is beyond victory and defeat—no mind! (*mushin* 無心). Thus his will is tempered like steel. How could one conquer him with the power of an energy which one claims for oneself alone?"

Then an aging gray cat came slowly forward and said: "Yes, it is indeed as you say. Energy, however strong, has a form (*katachi*) in itself. But whatever has form, however small it may be, can be grasped. Therefore I have for a long time trained my heart (心 *kokoro*). I do not cultivate the power to overcome others with the energy, like the second cat, and I do not hit out around me like the first cat. I attune (和 *wa*) myself to my opponent, get on to equal terms with him, and do not oppose him in any way. If the other is stronger than I am, then I will simply acknowledge that, and so to speak give into his will. My art is rather to gather the flying pebbles in a loose cloth. A rat that tries to attack me may be as strong as

you like, but it will find nothing to fly against, nothing to get to grips with. But today's rat simply didn't respond to my trick. It came and went as mysteriously as a heavenly being. I have never encountered one like it".

Then the old cat said: "What you call attunement does not arise from being, from the Greatness of Nature. It is an artificial, contrived attunement. Your conscious intention is to elude the adversary's charging energy. But because you are thinking about it, however fleetingly, he realizes what your plan is. If you try to attune to him in such a state of mind, then your energy, in so far as it concentrates on the attack, will be confused, mixed up, and your sharpness of perception and action will be considerably reduced. Whatever you do with fully conscious intent restricts the original pulsation of the Greatness of Nature as it takes effect from the depths of Mystery: it upsets the flow of your spontaneous movement. How then are you to put a miraculous power into practice? Only when you think of nothing, and do nothing, and in your movement surrender yourself to the pulsation

of Being, will you have lost all tangible form, and be so that nothing on earth can act as a counter-form; then there is no enemy left to resist you.



“But I do not believe that everything that you have practiced is pointless. Everything can be a means of the Way. Technique and Tao can be one and the same, and then the great Energy, the “governing *Ki*”, is already incorporated in you and is revealed in the action of your body. The power of the great Energy (*ki*) serves the human person. He who has free access to the Energy (*ki*) can encounter everything within infinite freedom and in the right way. If his energy is in tune, it will not shatter ever on gold or rock, and need exert no special power in battle. Only one

thing is necessary: that no trace of egotism, of self-consciousness comes into play, lest everything should be lost. If you think about all that, however fleetingly, then all will be artificial. It will not arise from Being, from the original pulsation of the body of the Way. Then the adversary will not submit to you but resist in his own behalf. What sort of a way or art is to be used? Only when you are in that disposition which is free of all consciousness of self, when you act without acting, without intention and stratagem, in unison with the Greatness of Nature, are you on the right Way. Abandon all intent, practice purposelessness and let it happen simply out of Being. This way is unending, inexhaustible.” And the old cat added something astounding: “You must not believe that what I have told you today is the highest of things. Not long ago a certain tom-cat was living in the next village to me. He slept the whole day long. No trace of anything resembling a powerful energy was to be observed in him. He just lay there like a lump of wood. No one had ever seen him catch a rat. But wherever he was, there wasn’t a rat to be seen!

And wherever he popped up or laid himself down, no rat ever appeared. One day I looked up and asked what that meant. He did not answer me. I asked him another three times. He was silent. But that doesn't mean that he didn't want to reply. Instead he clearly didn't know what he should say. But that is how it is: "He who knows says nothing, and he who says it knows it not." The cat had forgotten about himself and everything around him. He had become "nothing". He had reached the highest level of purposelessness. We can say that he had found the way of divine knighthood, which is to vanquish without killing. I am still a long way behind him".

Shoken heard all this as if in a dream, came by, greeted the old cat and said: "For a long time now I have been practicing the art of fighting, but I have not yet reached the end. I have absorbed your insights and I think that I have understood the true meaning of my way, but I ask you earnestly to tell me something more about your craft".



The old cat replied; “How is that possible? I am only an animal and the rat is my food. How should I know about human affairs? All I know is this: the meaning of the art of combat is not merely a matter of vanquishing one’s opponent. It is rather an art by which at a given time one enters into the great clarity of the primal light of death and life (生死を明らかにする *seishi wo akiraki ni suru*). In the midst of all his technical practice a true Samurai should always practice in his heart the acquisition of that clarity. For that purpose, however, he must plumb before all else the teaching of the ground of being of life and death. Only he acquires great clar-

ity of mind who is free from everything which could lead him off that way. When Being and encounter with Being are left undisturbed, to themselves, free from the ego and from all things, then whenever it is appropriate it can declare its presence complete freedom. But if your heart even fleetingly attaches itself to something, then Being itself is attached and is turned into something arrested in itself. If it becomes something arrested in itself, then there is something there that resists the I that is in itself. Then two entities face one another and fight one another for dominance.

“If that happens then the miraculous functions of being, even though used to all change, are restricted, the jaws of death gape close, and that clarity of perception proper to Being is lost. How then is it possible to meet the adversary in the right frame and peacefully contemplate “victory and defeat”? Even if you win, you win no more than blind victory that has nothing to do with the true aim of the art of the sword.

“Being free from mind and things (無心無物 *mu-*

shin mu-mono) does not of course mean an empty void. Being as such has no nature in itself. In and for myself it is beyond all form. It stores up nothing in itself. But if one grasps and remembers even fleetingly what it is and how fragile it is, the great Power will cling to it and it will contain the equilibrium of forces that flows from the Source. But if Being is even slightly subject to or imprisoned by something, it is no longer able to move freely and cannot pour forth in all its fullness. If the equilibrium that emanates from Being is disturbed, if its power is at all apparent, it quickly overflows; but without power its balance is inadequate. Where it overflows, too much power breaks out and there is no holding it back. Where it is inadequate, the energy is weakened and wanting, and it is never equal to the situation it is called on.

“What I call freedom from mind and things means only that if one does not lay up stores, one has nothing to rely on. Without secure provision there is no position to take up and nothing objective to have recourse to. There is neither a self nor an opponent. When something comes along, one meets it as it were

unawares, without any impact. In the *I Ching* (the Book of Changes), it is written ‘Without thinking, without action, without movement; quite still. Only thus can one proclaim the nature and law of things from within, quite unconsciously, and at last become one with heaven and earth.’ Whoever practices and understands the art of combat in that sense is close to the truth of the Way.”

When Shoken heard this, he asked: “What does it mean, that there is neither a subject nor an object, neither a self nor an opponent?”

The cat answered: “Because there is a self, there is an opponent. If there is no self, there is no opponent. What we call opponent, adversary, enemy, is merely another name for what means opposition or counter-part. *Yin* and *Yang*, ‘water’ and ‘fire’, are of this sort. In so far as things maintain a form, they also presuppose a counter-form. But wherever something is present as a something, it has a specific form. If my being is not constituted as a specific form, then there is no counter-form there.

“When there is no counterpart, no opposition, there is nothing which can come forth to oppose me. But that means that there is neither a self nor an opponent. If one wholly abandons self and thus becomes free, from the foundations upwards and from everything, then one will be in harmony with the world and one with all things in the great universal oneness. Even when the enemy’s form is extinguished one remains unconscious of it. That does not mean that one is wholly oblivious of it, but that one does not dwell on it, and the heart continues free from all attachment and even in its actions responds simply and freely from the center of being. If the heart is no longer possessed by anything and is free from all obsession, then the world, just as it is, is wholly our world and one with us. That means that henceforth one apprehends it beyond good and evil, beyond sympathy or antipathy. One is no longer caught up in anything in the world. All oppositions which present themselves to us, profit and loss, good and evil, joy and suffering, have their origin in us. Therefore in the whole spread of heaven and earth nothing is so

worthy of discernment as our own being.

“An ancient poet said:

When there is dust in the eye, the three worlds
are shut out;

When the mind and heart are without a care,
one's whole life is at ease.

In other words, if a speck of dust enters our eye, the eye will not open; for we can see clearly only if there is nothing within, but now the dust has penetrated to obstruct the vision within. Similarly with being that shines forth as light and illumination, and is essentially free of everything that is ‘something’. When however something does present itself, the very presentation destroys its essence. Another writer put it this way: ‘If one is surrounded by foes, by a hundred thousand enemies, one's form is so to speak pulverized. But my being, my nature, is mine and remains my own, however strong my enemy may be. No adversary can penetrate my being, my self.’ Confucius said: ‘You cannot steal the being of even a simple man.’ But if the heart is confused, then being

will turn against us.

“That is all that I can tell. Now return to yourselves and seek within yourselves. A teacher can only transmit the techniques and give you the principles, but “I myself” have to realise the truth and take it as my own. This is called self-appropriation (自得 *jitoku*). It is a transference from heart to heart (以心伝心 *i shin den shin*). It is a ‘bestowal by extraordinary means, beyond instruction and erudition’ (教外別伝 *kyogai betsuden*), which does not mean that the master’s teaching is to be contradicted. It means that even a master cannot pass on truth itself.

“And this is not only true of Zen: from the heart training (心法 *shinpo*) of the sages, right up to the arts and the crafts, self-appropriation is always the essence of the matter, a transmission from heart to heart, beyond instruction, of all teachings which are handed down. The meaning of every ‘teaching’ is only to show what everyone possesses in himself without already knowing it, and then to make him aware of it. There is no secret that the master can ‘hand over’ to the pupil. Teaching is easy. Listening

is easy. But it is difficult to become aware of what one has in one's self, to mark it out and really to take possession of it. That is known as looking into one's own being; this practice is called 'the one-eye vision' (一眼目 *ichigan-me*).¹

Satori is the great awakening out of the dream of errors.

Awakening, looking into one's own being, perception of the self one really is—they are all one and the same thing.”

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¹Text B reads: 見性 *kensho*, “seeing one's own true nature”.