

# The Mysterious Magical Art of the Cat



Issai Chozan

*Translation by Stephen Earle*

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## Translator's Introduction

“Neko-no Myōjutsu” (「猫の妙術」, “The Mysterious Magical Art of the Cat”) is one in a collection of stories entitled *Inaka-sōshi* (『田舎莊子』, *Child of a Country Manor*) published in 1727. Along with “Tengu Geijutsu-ron” (「天狗芸術論」, “The Tengu’s Lecture on the Martial Arts”) contained in the same collection, it has become an all-time classic within the world of the Japanese martial arts—so well-known, safe to say, that it has been read and admired by every accomplished martial artist to come out of the Japanese martial tradition during the last two-hundred-and-fifty years. Safe also to say, aikido’s Ueshiba Morihei O-Sensei and his many protégés are no exception.

Issai Chozan (佚斎樗山) is nom de plume for one Niwa Jurozaemon Tadaaki (1659–1741), a samurai of the Sekiyado fiefdom that once occupied an area now straddling the border between Chiba and Ibaragi prefectures. From his writings, we know that Niwa was an erudite scholar; he was thoroughly versed in the Chinese classics, and we must assume that he also knew the writings of Takuan Zenshi, Yagyū Munenori, and Miyamoto Musashi (whether or not he was familiar with Yamamoto Tsunetomo’s *Hagakure* (『葉隠』, *Hidden Leaves*), published just eleven years before *Inaka-sōshi*, is an intriguing question). Little is known regarding Niwa’s accomplishments as a martial artist, but when the old cat says “those who say cannot do, and those who do cannot say,” we are given the impression that the author is subtly poking fun at himself.

“Neko-no Myōjutsu” has been translated into English several times, most recently by William Scott Wilson (Shambala, 2006). Wilson’s scholarly translation is faithful to the original, and it also perceptively picks up on, and footnotes, a number of subtle allusions to passages from Chinese classics, something that exceeds my window of expertise. My beef, however, is two-fold: First, the translation is so literal as to obscure the author’s intended meaning. And second, it fails to recognize the specific martial significance of several terms, thereby also failing to adequately appreciate the story’s martial context: *Neko-no Myōjutsu* is first and foremost an effort by one martial artist to communicate his observations regarding those arts to other martial artists, and it needs to be viewed accordingly.

Levelling criticism is easy; following up on the challenge is far more difficult. Nevertheless, I have given it my best shot. In so doing, I have adopted an interpretive approach, going for lucidity and meaning over word-for-word accuracy and constantly asking the question, what is it that Issai was trying to say? The result, I believe, is not only more intelligible than previous translations but also reasonably faithful to the gist of the original.

As well as the original text, written in classical, Edo-period Japanese, I have referred to, and am indebted to, Ishii Kunio’s modern Japanese translation (Kōdansha, 2014).



## The Mysteriously Magical Art of the Cat

There was a swordsman named Shōken. One day, a large rat appeared in his house, brazenly running around in broad daylight. Shōken closed the doors to his living room, entrapping the rat inside, and fetched his cat. The rat, however, [rather than running,] advanced and attacked the cat, biting his face; the cat let out a shriek and ran away.

Seeing that his own cat was no match for this rat, Shōken went out into the neighborhood and borrowed a number of cats, all reputed to be excellent ratters. These, upon returning, he let loose in his room. The rat, however, seated defiantly in one corner of the *tokonoma* (床の間, an ornamental alcove that is a standard feature of traditional Japanese living rooms), waited until the cats approached and then retaliated. The ferocity of the rat's counter-attacks was such that the cats were cowed and dared not come forward.

Shōken flew into a rage. He took up his *bokken* (木剣, 'wooden sword'; a practice sword made of wood) and chased after the rat with the intention of slaying it. But try as he might, the rat easily scuttled out from under him, dodging his blows. Shōken swung this way and that, breaking the door and tearing the sliding screens, but the rat eluded him, moving at lightning speed and sometimes leaping high in the air. The rat moved with such alacrity and verve that Shōken feared it might jump up and bite him in the face.

Drenched in sweat, Shōken called his attendant and said, "I have heard there is a cat of exceptional ability six or seven hundred yards from here. Go borrow that cat and bring him to me."

The attendant returned with the cat and set him down. As cats go, he was not particularly impressive; he was lethargic and did not strike Shōken as being especially clever. Nevertheless, Shōken decided to give him a try. He cracked upon the door to the room where the rat was and pushed the cat inside. To his amazement, the rat immediately froze with fear. The cat nonchalantly walked over to the rat, clamped his jaws around its neck, and returned with it in his teeth.

That evening, all the cats gathered at Shōken's house. They showed the old cat, proven ratter without equal, to the seat of honor and respectfully bowed. "All of us have trained for many years in the way of ratting," they said. "We have sharpened our claws and polished our skills, earning reputations as distinguished ratters. In our time, we have wasted not only many a rat but even weasels and river otters. That said, in all our years, never has one of us encountered a rat of such daunting skill as the one today. What is the nature of the art you used to so easily catch and kill it? For the sake of our edification as ratters, please enlighten us as to the secrets of your prowess."

The old cat let out a hearty laugh. "You cats are all still young. You are amply proficient in your calling, but when confronted with the unexpected, because you have not been instructed with regard to the proper way of training, you do not know how to respond and consequently blunder. However, before I tell you the secrets of my art, please tell me what kinds of training each of you has pursued up until now."

From among the gathering, a shrewd-eyed black cat came forward. “I was born into a household of ratters and have dedicated myself to the way since I was very young. I developed my skills by jumping over seven foot screens and passing easily through small holes. When it comes to feats of speed and cunning, there is nothing I can’t do. Whether pouncing out of feigned sleep or chasing a rat down as he runs along the rafters, I am among the best and never fail to catch my prey. But today, for the first time, I have been humbled. Never before have I encountered such a formidable adversary; the events of the day exceed my understanding.”

The old cat responded. “I see that your training has, from beginning to end, been only about *dōsa* (動作, ‘movement, execution’; especially technical movements as the basis of martial technique), and consequently you have been unable to escape [graduate from] the mentality of one intent upon achieving a specific purpose. The teachers of old taught *dōsa* in order to elucidate the systematic logic [behind the art]. By design, the *dōsa* were simple, but they contained the essential principles of the teaching. What then happened, however, was that the students [of these old masters] became invested in the perfection of the *dōsa* [instead of in the discovery of the principles behind the *dōsa*]. So they studied what to do when an adversary does such and such and how to move when he moves this way or that. They invented *waza* (技, martial ‘techniques’). They exercised their wits and expanded the limits of their technical skill, all the while missing the point of their old master’s instructions—with the result that the teaching was diminished to mere competition, the matching of *dōsa* against *dōsa*. When a man of cunning perfects his technical skill and depends upon his wits, this is what happens. Wisdom is a function of mind, but the narrow-minded pursuit of technical skill absent the foundation of principles leads to false conceit; more often than not, the cultivation of cleverness leads to harmful results. Please reflect upon what I have said and use it as a means to your self-improvement.”

Next, a large, orange cat with tiger stripes came forward. “The essence of *bujutsu* (武術, ‘the martial arts’), I believe, is ennoblement through the cultivation of *ki* (気, ‘vital energy’). That is why I have dedicated myself to the cultivation of *ki*. At this time, I project my *ki* with great force; it flows without restriction, as if to fill heaven and earth. [Through strength of *ki*,] I trample my adversaries emotionally, conquering them mentally before actually facing off with them in battle. Responding to a rat’s faint cry or the patter of little feet, I spontaneously follow the rat’s movement right or left, never failing to catch my quarry. Just by glaring at him, I cause the rat running along the rafter to fall to where he is easy prey. But in spite of these abilities, today’s mighty rat was able to approach before I noticed and then to disappear suddenly and without a trace. How can this be possible?”

The old cat answered. “Your training has focused entirely on how to seize the advantage using the impetus of your *ki*. In so doing, however, you are relying solely on your own, learned abilities, not on the principled workings of *ki* itself. Fix your intention on the breaking of your adversary’s *ki* and you allow that adversary to break your *ki* in return. Furthermore, what are you to do when you come up against an adversary whose *ki* will not be broken?”

“By attempting to prevail over your adversary’s *ki*, you invite him to prevail over yours. What are you to do, then, when you come up against an adversary whose *ki* will not be broken,

try as you might? Or do you think that you are the only one who is strong and that all of your adversaries will be weak?

“The unrestricted, heaven-and-earth-filling force of which you speak is no more than the working of ki when it is given to form. You may think this is the same thing as the universal ki [universal life force] spoken of by Mencius, but it is not; there is a difference. Mencius’s universal ki is realized when the mind is clear, but your strength is no more than the efficient utilization of physical impetus. Thus, the result is not the same [as that of the universal ki] either. The two are as different as the never-ceasing flow of the Yellow River is from the temporary surge of an overnight flood.

“More importantly, what do you do when you come up against an adversary who will not be subdued by mere impetus? A rat, when he is forced into a corner, will attack and bite a cat. He will do so because he has no other options; he will do so out of desperation. Forgetting his will to live, forgetting his desires, he has neither thought of winning nor pays personal safety any mind. Consequently, his willpower is as strong as forged iron. Why would he submit to the impetus of your ki?”

Next, a somewhat elderly gray cat came quietly forward. “Just as you say, the orange cat has an abundance of ki, but he allows it to show. When one’s disposition is allowed to show even a little, he gives himself away. I, on the other hand, have engaged for many years in the training of the mind. I do not attempt to overwhelm my adversary [with strength of ki], nor do I contend with him [the way the black cat does]; rather, I attune myself to him. By prolonging that state of attunement, and by assuming a position of harmonious agreement—especially when he is belligerent—I am able to move in close to him. My way of engagement is like using a curtain to catch pebbles. [Passive and non-threatening, a curtain envelopes the pebble in its folds.] The most formidable of rats, even if he seeks to confront me, is foiled because I give him nothing to confront.

“Even so, that rat today responded no more to my strategy of attunement than he did to force of ki. He was like a supernatural being. Never before have I encountered such a rat.”

The old cat answered. “The harmonious attunement of which you speak is not the harmonious attunement of nature but the strategic deployment of attunement in order to bring about an intended result. You wish to elude confrontation with a high-spirited adversary, but when your intentionality is at work, even a little, your adversary will sense what it is that you are up to. Furthermore, in seeking mental attunement [with your adversary], you cloud your spontaneity and [as a result] fall back on habitual responses. When you act intentionally, you close down your natural capacities for intuitive perception. And when your natural capacities for intuitive perception are closed, how can you expect to be able to call forth even a single miraculous ability?

“When you move naturally and spontaneously, without thinking and without intention, guided entirely by your intuitive sense, you give nothing away [your movements cannot be anticipated]. When there is no self [to direct your movements], there can be no enemy.”

The old cat continued. “Nevertheless, I am not saying that all the training you cats have engaged in up until now has been of no value. Ki and the principle of the Way are consistent,

one with the other; consequently, the principle of the Way, in its barest essence, is contained in martial movement. Ki is what causes the body to function. If generously endowed with ki, you will be more effective in dealing with whatever confronts you. And if you cultivate a state of calmness and harmony, not only will you cease to resort to force as a means to resolving conflict, but you will also be unbreakable, even when up against steel or stone.

“Even so, however, should you harbor even the slightest calculations or thoughts of strategy, your intentions will show. Such is not the natural state of harmony informed by the Way. [When intentionality is present,] the will of the enemy is not subdued but provoked to enmity. For that reason, I have abandoned the use of martial techniques and strategies. I just engage with my opponent naturally and without thinking [from the state of *mushin* (無心, ‘no mind’)]. That said, there is no end to the Way. Please do not take anything I say to be ultimate truth.

“Long ago, there was a cat in the next village who did nothing but sleep all day. He was the epitome of lethargy, as if carved from wood. No one had ever seen him catch a rat. Nevertheless, the vicinity surrounding him was always completely free of rats. Even if he moved to a new location, the results were just the same. I sought out this cat and asked him to tell me his secrets, but he didn’t answer. I asked him four times, and four times he didn’t answer. It wasn’t that he refused to answer but that he couldn’t. This encounter taught me that those who say cannot do, and those who do cannot say. That cat was completely without sense of self or enemy; he was completely free of fixations. His martial valor approaching that of the gods, he no longer engaged in killing. I am still a long way from becoming that cat’s equal.”

Shōken listened to the cats’ discussion as if in a dream. Now he came forward, respectfully nodding to the old cat.

“I have trained for many years in *kenjutsu* (剣術, ‘the sword arts’), but mastery has always eluded me. But now, this evening, after listening to these discussions, I feel that I have, for the first time, grasped something of the kernel of truth at the heart of the Way. If you would be so kind, please say something about the *okugi* (奥義, ‘secret or esoteric wisdom’ behind the teachings).”

To this, the old cat answered, “No. I am but a beast; I catch rats because they are what I eat. How could I know anything about human affairs? But since you ask, I will tell you what I have overheard.

“The purpose of *kenjutsu* is not simply to enable one to prevail over others; rather, it is to enable one, in times of crisis, to respond decisively, with clarity, and without regard for life or death. To be a *bushi* (武士, ‘warrior’) is to continuously cultivate such mental clarity; [indeed,] attainment of proficiency in his art is for that purpose, and unless he attains such proficiency, his life is of no value. Furthermore, he must thoroughly understand Truth as it pertains to life and death, so that his mind is not subject to distraction, that it neither questions nor doubts, plots nor schemes; mind and ki must function in unison and with complete tranquility. As long as he maintains such a state of deep inner quiet, free of fixation, he will be able to respond appropriately and spontaneously to any situation or crisis that arises.



“Even the slightest hint of mental fixation, however, will show in the way he presents himself [to his adversary]; and when mental fixation becomes manifest in form, the distinction between self and enemy is made present, resulting in conflict. When such is the case, the warrior’s movements are restricted; he is incapable of responding freely or calling forth miraculous abilities. Once the mind falls under the spell of [the fear of] death, it loses its superior clarity. And should that happen, then how can he be expected to go willingly into battle and to clearly determine victory or defeat? Even if he secures victory, he does so in ignorance. Such is inconsistent with the purpose of kenjutsu.

“To be without fixations, however, is not the same as being in a blank state of emptiness. The original constitution of the mind is formless. Thus, there is no need to accumulate [knowledge or technical understanding]. Accumulate just a little and your ki [your attention] will become skewed toward that which has been accumulated. And if your ki becomes skewed, even a little, in a particular direction, you will not be able to respond spontaneously and unhindered to situations as they arise. That to which your ki is directed will assume disproportionate importance, while that to which your ki is not directed will lack appropriate attention. When too much attention is directed toward something, that attention fosters impetuosity and an excess of energy that cannot be stopped. Conversely, when insufficient attention is directed toward something, the requirements of the task at hand are overlooked and you fail to dispatch your mission. Either way, in time of crisis, you will be unable to respond adequately. What I mean by ‘without fixations’ is a state wherein the mind harbors nothing; one’s ki [one’s attention] is not directed toward any particular object; there is neither enemy nor self; and when events force themselves upon you, you are able to respond appropriately while leaving behind no trace.

“The *I Ching* [*The Book of Changes*, a Chinese classic] says, ‘Nothing to be thought, nothing to do. Rest in quietude, without moving. Then, unexpectedly, whatever is needed to resolve any situation under heaven will be revealed.’ The student of kenjutsu who understands this principle is close to realizing the Way.”

Shōken asked, “What do you mean by ‘no enemy, no self’?”

The old cat answered as follows. “Because there is a self, there are enemies. If there is no self, then there are no enemies. The word ‘enemy’ denotes something in opposition [to the self]. The relationship [of enemy to self] is like that of yin and yang or of fire and water. Generally speaking, all things, all objects given to form, have something in opposition to them. On the other hand, if the mind is not given to form [if it harbors no concept of self], then there can be nothing to oppose it. That which has no opposition cannot be compared [cannot be challenged]. This is the state of ‘no enemy, no self.’ When one enters into a state of deep tranquility in which mind and things are both forgotten, the all becomes one. In this state, even were you to destroy that which takes the form of an enemy, you would not know it. Not that you would be unconscious of it, but your attention [your consciousness] would not linger on the event; you would simply act according to the directions of your intuitive sense.

“When the mind enters a state of deep tranquility, the whole world becomes my world [the world of mind]. It is said that in this state there is no right or wrong, no likes or dislikes, no hindering attachments. Sense of pain and pleasure or of gain and loss do not enter in.

Heaven and earth may be vast, but one need not seek anything outside of the mind [the vastness of heaven and earth and the vastness of the mind are one].

“Men of old said, ‘When dirt gets in the eye, vision of the three worlds [the world of desire, of physical form, and of formless spirit] becomes narrow. When the mind is without attachment, life becomes spacious [free of threat or worry].’ A fleck of dirt or grain of sand gets in your eye and you cannot open it; because something foreign has gotten into it, the eye that once saw clearly no longer sees anything. The eye is a metaphor for the mind.”

The old cat continued. “Even were I to be surrounded by ten million enemies and my body, cut up into tiny bits, this mind remains uniquely mine. No matter how great the enemy, he can do nothing to alter that fact. Lao Tzu said, ‘Even if your adversary is only one in number, you cannot deprive him of his intentionality.’ On the other hand, the mind that wavers acts in the interest of the enemy [it reveals your vulnerabilities]. About these matters, this is as much as I can say. Forthwith, please reflect on what you have heard and discover your own answers.

“A master transmits certain [rigorously defined] techniques and tutors [through admonishment] with regard to the principle of the Way; [but] it is up to you [as his student] to discover the truths contained [in his teachings]. This is what is meant by self-realization. It is also called *ishin-denshin* (以心伝心, ‘direct transmission from mind to mind’). It is also called *kyōge-betsuden* (教外別伝, from Buddhism, ‘realization attained outside of the teachings; revelation through intuitive discernment’). It’s not that you should turn your back on the teachings but that you should endeavor to discern from the master’s words that which cannot be said. Nor is this the privileged domain of Zen. It applies to everything from the sacred teachings of realized saints to teachings of any of the masters of the arts. Mastery is only to be attained through *ishin-denshin*, through *kyōge-betsuden*.

“Teachings only become teachings when they are received by the student. Teachings only point to that of which the student is unaware, thus causing him to discover on his own. Teachings are not something simply to be received from the master. It is easy to teach and it is easy to listen to teachings; however, discovering the truth of the teachings and making this truth your own, this is difficult. This is what is meant by *kenshō* (見性, ‘realization, enlightenment’). To attain *satori* (悟, ‘enlightenment’) is to awaken from the delusional dream. It is the same as *satori* (覚, ‘awakening’); there is no difference.”

END

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