



GORAN POWELL

# Waking Dragons

*a martial artist faces his ultimate test*

Foreword by GEOFF THOMPSON



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*To my Senseis, Joe Claronino, Stav, Chris Rowen and  
Gavin Mulholland; and to my first Sempai, the late  
Gary Malcolm. Thank you for teaching me.*



## Foreword

It is rare that I get a book landing on my doorstep that actually has something new, something substantial to say about karate and the combat arts. Most manuscripts I read are so busy taking themselves way too seriously that I don't usually manage to get past the introduction. This wonderful book by Goran Powell does not, I am delighted to say, fall into this category; rather it falls into that rare category of books that leave you inspired and wanting more. What I love about this book (apart from the fact that it is written beautifully – rare in a martial arts book) is the fact that it is about me. And it is about you. It is about all of us. Don't be fooled by the title of the book – this is about much more than match-fighting 30 fresh opponents, this is much more than looking into the belly of karate; this book is about facing the inner opponent, it is about looking into the belly of fear itself. As a species, we have an innate urge to stretch the boundaries of our world by stepping into discomfort, and from my experience so far on this spinning planet discomfort

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is where all the action is. All the gold is neatly stacked in great abundance just behind the wall of fear that most of us dare not even attempt to surmount. So this book is great because it is less about karate and more about human nature, it is great because it is less about the Thirty Man Kumite and more about challenging our limitations and growing a little cerebral muscle. It is not about belts and badges and trophies and awards. When you face 30 fresh opponents – one after the other, each trying to flatten the world with your head – it is about pure survival, about what you've got and who you are, and how each of you will react under extreme pressure. It is about cranking yourself up to your limit, taking a deep breath and then cranking it up some more.

This motivational book follows one man's brave journey to his own outer limits, and Goran's account will inspire you to leave the couch and take your own journey. Whatever and wherever that might be.

It inspired me, and I know it will inspire you.

Geoff Thompson



## Glossary

<b>Aikido</b>	Flowing Japanese grappling art
<b>Bunkai</b>	Self-defence techniques
<b>Dan</b>	Levels of black belt
<b>Dojo</b>	Training hall
<b>Escrima</b>	Filipino martial art
<b>Gi</b>	Martial arts training suit
<b>Goju Ryu</b>	Okinawan style of karate
<b>Hajime</b>	Begin
<b>Jujitsu</b>	Japanese grappling art
<b>Kata</b>	P rearranged sequence of movements
<b>Kyokushinkai</b>	Full-contact style of karate
<b>Ryu</b>	Association
<b>Sempai</b>	Class senior or assistant instructor
<b>Sensei</b>	Instructor
<b>Shotokan</b>	Japanese style of karate
<b>Taekwondo</b>	Korean martial art
<b>Tao</b>	A tricky one to define, since the opening of the Taoist bible tells us <i>'that which can be expressed in words is not the eternal Tao'</i> . I use it playfully in the sense of <i>fate</i> or <i>that which life throws at you</i> .
<b>Yame</b>	Stop
<b>Zen</b>	Japanese Buddhism





## The Field of Truth

*It's one of those perfect English summer days: hazy sunshine, lush green trees and soft grass underfoot. We're gathered in a scouts' camp in the glorious countryside outside Portishead, just south of Bristol. In any other circumstances, we'd be kicking back and relaxing, throwing a frisbee or cracking open a few beers. But there's work to be done, and it isn't tying knots or collecting firewood. This is a karate camp.*

*The instructors have told everyone to meet on the small field near the entrance. They have taken to calling it the Field of Truth. They have a mean sense of humour.*

*No one knows why we're here, except Carl and me. I was told in confidence several weeks ago, and I managed to keep my mouth shut, which wasn't easy. Carl's been thinking of little else for the past few weeks. Or more likely months. He's about to attempt the Thirty Man Kumite.*

*He'll fight 30 people, one after another. They'll be the highest ranked fighters in our association. Every fight will be 'full contact'. It will last one minute. No gloves. No shin pads. No headguards. Full-power punches to the body are allowed, plus sweeps, throws, and kicks to the*

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*legs, body and head. No face punching. No strikes to the joints or groin. Carl will get a two-minute break after ten fights and another one after 20. If he's knocked out, or knocked down and can't continue, he will fail his test.*

*There's a small huddle of spectators on the Field of Truth. They are looking on curiously as 30 fighters line up along the far side of the field. Carl is warming up in the middle, alone with his thoughts, steeling himself for what lies ahead.*

*Nobody really knows what to expect. Many fighters in the line-up have not met Carl before. He's been away for a while. To the uninitiated, it looks like a massacre is about to occur. But I'm not so sure. I know Carl from the old days. I remember him winning medals at knockdown tournaments (heavyweight division). I remember him training with the British squad. I know what he's capable of with his kicks. As I take my place at the head of the line-up, I'm glad he'll be fighting 29 people before me.*

*The instructors call the proceedings to order. There's no great ceremony. We take a simple bow and the first fighter is called out. They begin. After a few seconds, Carl catches him with a head kick. It's perfectly controlled, because this is a grading, not a tournament. If it had been a tournament, the guy would be out cold. Instead, he collapses to his knees, badly dazed. After a short break the instructors get him on his feet, but for the rest of the fight, he stays well away from Carl.*

*The second fighter comes up and is promptly knocked down too. A pattern is beginning to form, and the line-up doesn't like what it's seeing.*

## The Field of Truth

*Carl is making it look very easy to take someone's head off. Some of the less experienced fighters are starting to look decidedly nervous, wishing they were back in their tents, or better still, back home with the Sunday papers like every other normal human being.*

*Carl's plan is working nicely for him, and I begin to wonder whether he'll be troubled at all during his line-up. But even the best-laid plans can go astray.*

*Carl has already been training hard for two days, and the afternoon heat is intense. The sweating is causing his body to lose salt, which can bring on cramps. As early as the third fight, he begins to clutch at his hamstrings in pain. It looks like he's pulled a muscle.*

*The instructors stop the fight for a few seconds and give him the chance to stretch his legs. Then he's forced to continue. Meanwhile, the fighters in the line-up are taking no chances. They're badly spooked by what they saw earlier, and they're all going in hard to avoid getting picked off. This is bad news for Carl, and his real test is just beginning.*

*Kicking high is too painful now, so he's forced to trade punches and low kicks instead. By the time he reaches his first break, after ten fights, he's looking tired and dazed. He sits in the shade of tree, sipping water and stretching his hamstrings, trying to get them back into play.*

*It's no use. As the fighting begins again, it's clear he's going to have to do things the hard way... toe-to-toe. Soon he's struck by cramps again, and things begin to look ominous.*

*The instructors call a halt. They lay him on his front and massage the backs of his legs. He gets up, slowly, painfully, and forces himself to continue. As each fight goes on, he is climbing up the grades, facing*

## WAKING DRAGONS

*stronger and stronger fighters. They're still mindful of his opening performance, and going in very hard.*

*The sun beats down on him unmercifully, and the tiredness is taking its toll, but the crowd refused to let him stop, or even slow down. They urge him on, shouting and screaming at him to hit back, throw punches and low kicks, to fight harder.*

*After 20 fights, Carl gets another short break. He takes some more water and stretches out his legs. Then the fighting begins again. Pretty soon, Carl is in a seriously bad way. Cramps strike him again and this time, he seems genuinely unable to continue. I watch as he sits forlornly in the shade of a tree, sipping water and massaging his legs. The instructors are clearly concerned, and talk to him quietly. For a moment, no one's quite sure what to do. They can't allow him a long break now. It would negate the test.*

*I begin to wonder if they are going to pull him out? Sensei Gavin is kneeling beside him. He looks around, scanning the horizon, as if searching for a solution. There isn't one. After a few seconds, he simply stands up and calls out the next fighter. There's a moment of stillness. Then Carl gets to his feet, in a trance, and squares up. The fighting resumes and he continues his battles through gritted teeth.*

*Now he is among the strongest, most powerful black belts. They put him under incredible pressure. One after another smashes away at his body and legs, dropping their body weight onto his battered thighs with the hard bones of their shins. There are no pads. This is just muscle and bone. Carl refuses to give in to the pressure, and hits back, but each new fighter is fresh, while Carl is at the edge of exhaustion.*

## The Field of Truth

*He is close to the end of the line-up, and things are getting ugly. Mark launches a blistering attack on Carl, stalking him and then smashing away at his body and legs with massive, lightning-fast combinations. Steve smashes Carl's chest and ribs with huge, thudding punches and then switches to low kicks on the legs. Carl is taking massive punishment, but refuses to go down. His pride will not allow him to give in. He hits back as best he can.*

*Eventually his spirit takes him through 29 full-contact bouts. It is time for one final fight. I jog out to face him. He looked tired and shaken and I know his left leg is badly damaged. It has taken a terrible battering. Now, some people are cruel, and they would target this leg unmercifully, but I like to consider myself a gentleman, and prefer to attack other areas – the places that can still take a bit more punishment.*

*The fight begins and I test Carl with a few body shots. He wobbles slightly and throws a couple of slow punches. I avoid them easily and slam a couple of low kicks onto his 'good' leg. I can pick him off at will. I don't really want to knock him over on his last fight, but equally, I don't want it to be too easy. After all, this is his grand finale.*

*Suddenly, the same fact seems to register with Carl. It's his last fight. He shouts loudly, to encourage himself, and surges forward, throwing hard punches. He's summoning every last drop of energy. I notice the change immediately, and get up on my toes to avoid getting caught. Now we are fighting.*

*He throws a thunderous left, right combination. I back away to avoid the shots and ram a hard front kick into his gut. I hear a loud thud, and feel the air go out of him, but he's hyped up now and keeps coming.*

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*He leans forward and grabs my shoulders, hoping to pull me onto a knee strike. Oi, Carl, man, I wasn't born yesterday! Before he can smash me, I hook a big right uppercut into his belly, just where the kick landed moments earlier. Nothing. Carl is unstoppable now. The crowd is yelling furiously, willing him on for one last, tremendous effort.*

*We trade punches and kicks, and Carl fights hard for one last, furious minute. Then it's all over. The timekeeper shouts 'Time!' and the instructors call 'Stop!' but we don't hear a thing. In the end, they step between us and wave their arms. We break.*

*Carl has done it. He's the first student in our association to complete the Thirty Man Kumite. Everyone is in awe of his achievement. No one has ever seen anything quite like it.*

*That evening we go to the local swimming baths, and Carl comes along to relax his tired muscles. His body is battered and bruised all over, but he's in good spirits. Some of the guys goof around in the pool. Carl relaxes in the hot tub, chatting to some of the younger members, basking in the glory of what he'd done earlier in the day.*

*Later, back at the camp, we prepare our evening meals over a kerosene stove. Carl's tent is pitched next to mine and Sensei Gavin's and Sensei Dan's. After eating his pasta, he tells us he's going to lie down 'just for half an hour'. He assures us he'll meet us later by the campfire.*

*We didn't see him again until late the next morning, and who could blame him?*



## The Rainbow Club

It's another wet Saturday morning. We're on an endless grey motorway, somewhere south of Birmingham. I'm sitting in the front seat, next to my dad, in our lilac Morris Marina estate, British Leyland's finest. We're going to a judo grading.

I can't recall where exactly, some place in Birmingham, or perhaps it was Wolverhampton? We were always driving up there, to Aston or Halesowen, to some judo tournament or other.

Every time was the same. The same empty feeling in the pit of my stomach, the cold sweats, the frequent toilet stops, the dry throat; and the same question, over and over again: *What am I doing here?* Why am I not back home in warm, gentle Worcester, playing happily in the street with all the other children?

We're looking for the Renbukan Judo Club. As usual, the directions we have are crap, so we stop to ask an old lady. 'There's no Rainbow Club around here darling,' she informs me. 'There is a bingo club...'

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We keep searching until we find the mighty Renbukan. It's a little church hall, with no sign outside. There's nothing to indicate there might be judo inside. But as I go through the door the familiar smell of judo hits me: the damp, dusty, sweet, stale smell of a mat where hundreds of bodies have fought over the years.

I report to the instructors. They tick my name on their list and I get changed in a dingy little room. I wait, nervously. Eventually, I'm called up and demonstrate my throws. I have some fights and do some grappling on the ground. In the end, I pass my grading and get a new belt. I go home, pleased as punch.

That was how it always worked. Once the test was over, and the fighting done, I was delighted with myself, and very glad I'd done it.

My interest in judo began in 1972, when I was seven. Mum showed me a clipping from the Worcester Evening News. It was about a new sport called judo, where even the smallest person can throw the biggest person, once they know the secrets. She was quite fascinated by the martial arts, although she had no intention of trying them herself. She encouraged me to have a go. Dad offered to take me along to the club. It sounded magical. I agreed to give it a try.

On Saturday we drove along the Newtown Road and down Tallow Hill to St Paul's Judo Club in the city centre. Inside there was a large area of hard matting, covered in thick, dirty white canvas. Those were the days before those fancy green

## The Rainbow Club

nylon mats were invented. The surface was as hard as nails, especially in winter. The only consolation was that as a kid, you didn't have far to fall.

I met the instructor, a small, kindly man called Jeff Woods. He wore a thick white canvas suit and an orange belt, and he had bad teeth. He wrote my name down on a scrap of paper.

'Goran,' I told him.

'*Gareth?*'

'Goran.'

'*Darren?*'

'G O R A N!!'

'Oh, *Gordon!* Why didn't you say?'

He showed me how to place my hands for a forward roll, fingers pointing back, to avoid hurting them as I went over. These were called breakfalls. I saw the other children running and tumbling across the mat, but I practised slowly a few more times. Then I learned a simple hip throw. We did a few exercises and I went home quite happy. It seemed fun.

I trained twice a week and was soon tumbling happily with the other kids, playing games and learning as we went along. Soon we were fighting for points, using throws, and hold-down. Later we learned arm-locks and strangles.

Jeff would call me out to fight: '*Darren! Gareth! Gordon!*' After many years together, we settled on *Garron*. Life has been much easier since Goran Ivanisevich won Wimbledon.

I would wrestle with one of my clubmates for a minute or two, and then someone else would come out and have a go. I

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didn't like being called out to fight, but once it started, I was fine. I won as often as I lost.

Often I would fight Jeff's son Greg, who was about my age. We got to know each other's style so well, neither could get anything on the other. Our matches always ended in a draw.

The club was run on a shoestring budget, and the roof had a habit of leaking. We would be rolling around, trying for a hold-down, with rainwater pouring onto the mat beside us. We were too busy fighting to take much notice.

A few years later, a karate class began to share our training hall. I would watch them training. They would stand in neat rows, punching the air and shouting. My dad had done a bit of boxing and he was unimpressed. 'They're just punching the air,' he'd mutter disdainfully. I had to admit, it looked a lot easier than judo. Judo was always a struggle.

Doing judo earned me a certain respect at school. The bullies tended to leave me alone and go in search of weaker prey. I enjoyed this freedom from oppression.

But after a few years, the fun began to go out of my training. We were getting bigger and older. The fights were getting tougher. I wanted to stay home or play with my mates in the street. My parents gently encouraged me not to give up.

Jeff wanted me to fight in the club team, so I began going up to tournaments in the Birmingham area. Because of my physique (Mum assured me I was *sturdy*, not fat) I always found myself in the heavier weight categories, fighting older boys. I rarely did well. Then one year, there was a new tournament based on

## The Rainbow Club

age. This time, being the biggest and most experienced, I won a gold medal. I was the West Midlands judo champion.

I was over the moon. The West Midlands was practically the whole world as far as I was concerned. For a while it reignited my interest. I competed for two more years, winning more medals. But by the time I reached my teens, my interest was beginning to seriously wane.

It was around this time that the skateboard craze hit town. Every kid in the neighbourhood took their roller-skates apart and nailed them to a plank of wood. We were radical. I didn't want to spend my Saturday afternoons fighting on a smelly old mat. I wanted to do kick-flips, 360s and get airborne like Tony Alva or Stacey Peralta.

I saved up and bought a set of Kryptonite wheels (big reds if you must know, 70mm) and a set of Tracker trucks. Dad and I made decks out of fibreglass and wood, and we stuck sandpaper on top for extra grip. The kids built a ramp in the street and we went up and down, all day and late into the evening. Mum always made me come in before the other children. *Oh, Mum, just five more minutes, please!*

Next I bought an electric guitar and amplifier, and practised to be a rock star. I learned to play my favourite songs by Elvis Costello, Stiff Little Fingers and the Undertones. Finally at the age of 15, I put my foot down and told my parents I wasn't doing judo any more. They were saddened, but I was old enough to make my own decisions.