


*Old Steel is a personal chronicle about how we must evolve and rethink our martial training and teaching, as we age.*

*Gabelhouse offers a narrative of how we can positively evolve our martial training and teaching through the changes and challenges of old age.*

**OLD STEEL:  
FINDING OUR PATH AS AGING MARTIAL ARTISTS**  
by GARY GABELHOUSE

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**GARY GABELHOUSE**

**OLD  
STEEL**

**FINDING OUR PATH AS AGING  
MARTIAL ARTISTS**

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# INTRODUCTION

## I Didn't See It Coming

I Suppose, despite I walked the path of self-awareness—the mysteriously cool path of Budo—it was garden-variety denial that caused me to *not see it coming*. Now, almost twenty years afterward, I can remember the very night it happened.

It was back when I had just turned fifty. That night at the dojo, something in my body core—something deep inside of me—*broke*, and I just seemed weaker. It happened during a rousing round of monkey rolls, that, like monkey rolls are want to do, seemingly went on a bit too long. When I got up off the ground, sweating and wounded, I quickly looked around the dojo floor to see if it had happened to anyone else. Everyone, including me was stone faced...stoic...full of Budo spirit...more so, just full of ourselves, and also, full of shit. Full of stupid.

I remember thinking, *what the hell was that?* And as I shifted to body conditioning drills without any hesitation, my normal and reliable ability to recover, seemed to have abandoned me. It was like I had broken something inside of me, and it made me weaker. It took me by surprise. I had not seen it coming. And that *brokenness*—that deep weakness—it never left me since that night of monkey rolls.

Of course, back then, we were immortal. We walked the path of Budo—the *warriors' path*. We were different. We were unbreakable. We were immortal. And none of us saw it coming. We were too good at containing our pain and exhaustion—all too willing to pay the price of blood, sweat but no tears, in our pursuit of our training—

*hard training.* Every night we pushed through the barriers between what's possible and what's not. And we proudly kept moving our personal barriers further and further out—what would be considered by most people, as going from normal to insane.

As Hunter S. Thompson recommended to all the fiercely wacko of the world, "Buy the ticket. Take the ride."

My Budo brothers and I had all bought the ticket, and we took the ride that broke our bones, tore our tendons, ligaments and muscles. We wore our heavy gis and trained in the stifling hot dojo all day, and when we finally peed, ignored the bloody urine, knowing we were karate men, and we were unbreakable.

I paid my admission and took that ride for over thirty years. And it was that night when the monkey rolls made me first realize that something really serious had happened--something I hadn't seen coming...*I had gotten old.*



# CHAPTER ONE

## Evolve, Quit, or Die

**S**ome years after the monkey rolls warned me that I was getting old, I finally realized that I was getting old.

And a few years after the monkey-rolls incident, another episode acted as a harbinger of the end of my life as a vital, strong budoka, and the beginning of my journey as an aging martial artist. For years I had taken solo training pilgrimages to Asia—mostly to Japan. It was during one of my solo training visits to Japan late in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that I was welcomed to train at the Daitoryu dojo of Ohgami, Kenkichi-Sensei. In the Daibukan Dojo, I fell in love with the koryu art of Daitoryu Aikijujitsu. I began to completely focus my annual and semi-annual training trips only on Daitoryu, and when in Japan, trained only at the Daibukan. After five years of regular training, which included a stint as a live-in student, plus visits of Ohgami-Sensei and his senior students—my sempai—to our dojo in Lincoln, I was in consideration of being awarded Dan ranking in Daitoryu. Ohgami-Sensei and I grew close. I acted as his uke in seminars staged throughout the Rocky Mountain West and also the Bay Area and Southern California.

In 2001, I flew to Japan to test under Ohgami-Sensei for Dan rank. I flew the thirteen hour flight to Osaka, took the Namba Cat from Osaka station, and completely fatigued and jet lagged, I came straight from the airport and was met by my entire Japanese family in the small front room of Ohgami-Sensei's home. We had a beeru or two and everyone was happy to see me, and I them. Truthfully, I was dog tired. Bone weary.



True to form, at six o'clock, Ohgami-Sensei announced in his samurai growl, "Hai dozo! Daitoryu Aikijujitsu! YOSH!"

I unpacked my dogi and followed my sempai, Shigitani, and Murakami into the dojo, built on the side of Sensei's home. Shigitani was a combative trainer for the Japanese Defense Force. He was formidable, and we called him the *Iron Bull*. Murakami was a kindly and diminutive monk with an iron grip.

We changed into our dogis and went to line up in seiza in the stifling heat of the dojo with its one, small window that was always kept shut. Regular students were crowding the dojo, and using up all the air to breathe. Beginning the training, I felt I could certainly die. I had had no sleep in seventy two hours, was dehydrated from hanging over the Pacific in a plane for thirteen hours, and now thirteen hours ahead, the next day on my Midwestern body clock, I didn't know whether to pass out or puke.

I trained in the furnace of the dojo for three hours. Hard training. I sweat and sweat, and then I didn't. Feeling dangerously weak and exhausted, I stripped off my soaked dogi, got back into my street clothes and went back to Sensei's front room to a late dinner. Seated in the blissful cool of the front room, iced by the small, ductless air conditioner whose brand name was, *Beaver*, I picked sparingly at the wonderful sushi and sashimi.

I felt awful. I felt more awful than awful. I endured the dinner, forced my smiles, but knew I was broken. And I had to walk a mile to the ryokan Sensei had arranged for me. As my sempai left for home, it was only the Iron Bull, Sensei and I left in the front room. I got up to start my long walk to the ryokan. And then it began.

My right calf cramped. It was a bad cramp that rolled the calf muscle into a knot behind my knee. Then my instep. Next, my hamstring. My entire right leg was in a state of spasm. Then my left calf cramped, followed by my instep and then my left hamstring. I fell to the floor and groaned in pain.

Shigitani and Sensei had no idea what was going on. For all they knew, I was dying, or at least it sounded like it, as I was screaming at the top of my lungs.

Then even my stomach muscles started to cramp. Embarrassed at my ruckus, I began shouting, "Gomenisai! Gomenisai!" Which was Japanese for, "Pardon me! Pardon me!"

Shigitani and Sensei were spooked. Through gritted teeth, I told Sensei it was leg cramps. I got Shigitani and Sensei to each grab a leg, and try to straighten them. I kept screaming *Gomenisai* as they tried to counter the contractions in my legs. Finally, the cramps dissipated, and my leg muscles relaxed and unwrapped themselves like twisted ropes. I lay there on the tatami mats of the room, exhausted and unable to move.

Both Sensei and Shigitani left me. At least there was no more screaming. But embarrassed at my loss of face, everyone had left me alone so I would lose no more dignity. I lay there and realized the cool air of the air conditioner was blowing on my bare legs. I found a blanket and began to meditate, and relax my body and its mass of twitching muscles.

Sensei came into the room. I told him I was going to try to get up again. He said if I could get up, he would drive me to the ryokan. Entering my contemplative practice, I succeeded in standing, as all the muscles in my body seemed as if twitching with electricity. I slowly

walked to Sensei's small car, and rode silently to the ryokan.



After being waived on to my room, and nodding to Sensei, thanking him for driving, and asking forgiveness for my disruption, I literally collapsed on the tatami floor. I crawled to a futon mat and found a pillow full of buckwheat hulls. I curled into a fetal position, and lay there in the dark, alone and a world away from home. And I was afraid. With every muscle

contracting in spasm, I reflected on the fact that my heart was a muscle, too. The monkey rolls had cracked that something deep inside of me a few years before. Then, during a hot and jet-lagged night, my Daitoryu training had mercilessly crushed whatever was left of my resilience.

So, it was years after the fact that I realized I had grown too old to train Karate like it should be trained. And when I realized that, I was as mad as hell about it—mad as hell about getting too old to walk the same martial path I had for decades. At first, it seemed like betrayal. Maybe it was.

Hell, now, I can't punch, kick, or do kata without damn near falling down. And for nearly four decades, I gave everything I had to my training—*hard training*. But now, my reward is being a crippled old man with neural and orthopedic issues that have robbed me of my martial ability. I can't get off the sofa without effort, let alone

## OLD STEEL

passably perform my kata. I don't even have the proper balance to walk to the bathroom without fear of becoming a Med Alert advertisement. And that pretty much leaves me out of teaching Karate or Daitoryu. So, if that truly seems like a square deal to you, I'll kiss your ass.

I had originally come to the martial arts with a history of *full investment*. As a teenager through my thirties I was a professional mountaineer and an outdoor adventurer. I staged expeditions throughout Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, North, Central and South America. I would have climbed on all of the earth's seven continents if it were not for the Falklands War that derailed my expedition to Mt. Vinson in Antarctica. For two decades I regularly risked my life in the halls of the mountain gods.



After landing in a hospital for severe frostbite three times, and almost losing all my toes and the fingers of one hand, and after being dead for ten minutes with High Altitude Pulmonary and Cerebral Edema on the North Face of Mt. Kenya, and coming conscious in the hell of a mission hospital in Nyere, and after being racked with tropical dysenteries, and fevers, eluding machete-wielding Somali pirates, rogue soldiers in Kenya, Uganda, Liberia and the Sudan, and after I was put in a small hot box by an Ecuadorian military officer north of Latacunga because I wouldn't pay the bribe, and escaped to Otavalo only to be robbed by Columbian bandits, I sought escape to the safety of the martial arts.



**Deader than a doornail on Mt. Kenya**

And as I did with my climbing, I fully invested myself in my martial practice. But after over thirty years of training—hard training—the martial arts seemingly betrayed me. I know it's whiney and feeling sorry for myself, but I left nothing in reserve, and put it all on the

table. And the martial arts happily took my bet—took it all.

Sure, one learns from such, like learning that one can't always expect fairness in life. I have found that the martial arts takes, and tends to offer little giving in return. We gloss over this *character flaw* of the martial arts with words that are mostly trite, bravado, and vague Asian axioms dredged from the scripts of old Kung Fu movies. The martial arts is like a beautiful woman who will take everything you have to give, smile, maybe kiss you on the cheek, and then walk off, leaving you unloved, empty and broken.

Expectation and attachment left aside, one gains varying levels of *return* on one's investments in life. I invested almost everything I had in my adventures, expeditions and climbs. The return I received was amazing. After I was unable to continue at an elite level of climbing, and perhaps, unwilling to continue to play in such an exceedingly high-stakes game of life and death, I turned to martial arts.

And so, as before, I invested almost everything I had to invest. The return I received from the arts, in and of itself, was much smaller—I guess I could truthfully say, disappointingly so. It's not that the martial arts *owed* me anything, nor did I *expect* much of anything—certainly not a guaranteed rate of return. It is just that my reasonable and objective consideration is that the arts provided me with a relatively small, tangible return.

The one thing I do appreciate, that came from my years of training is the number and quality of the friends I've made. But despite gifting me with a number of true Budo Brothers and Sisters—the martial arts was not at all kind to me. At best, the martial arts tricked me into thinking I would always have it—that the floor would

always be there for me. At worst, it betrayed me, and left me broken, unable to train, and unable to share the floor with my Budo Siblings.

Now, I see my seniors and sempai all around me struggling with this same betrayal. Sensei Pete—an old war horse who started training in the early sixties, dedicated his life to his Karate. The Arts gave him an early stroke for his decades on the floor. But goddamn it he persisted. He couldn't tie his own obi, but his senior student, Joe, did it for him before he took the floor. And where in the hell is it fair that Sensei Pete dies because he can't get out of his car that has stalled on the railroad tracks? How is it at all fair that with all of Sensei Pete's effort to start the flooded car, there is no time left for an old man impaired by a stroke to escape? Where is there any warrior's honor in that death?

And Sensei Pete's senior student, Joe? In grief of his loss, he came to our dojo to train. And it was crazy hot and humid, and we trained hard—too hard. And Sensei Joe got sick. I told him to sit out the rest of the gasshuka, but he didn't. And when he went home, he landed in the hospital. He was in a coma for weeks. And when I went to visit him, he was a slobbering infant of an old man, cared for by his older parents. He cried and whined gibberish and nonsensical child talk, and thankfully he died in his sleep, soon after. Sure as hell, we killed Sensei Joe with hard training. And following in his Sensei's footsteps, where was the warrior's honor in that death?

I'm so mad about it, it makes me want to spit on the fuckin' floor. But I do know that perpetually maintaining anything in life *as it always was*, is like shoveling shit against the tide. Life is about changes. Change is the only constant in life. Change. We humans have to play

by mostly the same rules as any other species on the planet. And, as a species, we have only three available responses when our life's environment changes on us. We must do one of three things: Evolve, migrate or die.

When we are no longer able to do martial arts due to our aging, we can respond to this life change and move to a place in life where there is no need to ever do martial arts again, for any reason whatsoever. That migration from the arts is called retirement. We can retire altogether from the martial arts—as we have always defined them. Of course, if we, in our sixties, seventies or older, persist in doing eight-hour training sessions, and are not satisfied until we puke and see blood in our urine, well...we can exercise the option that Sensei Joe did, and die.

I counsel evolution. I say we evolve. And in doing so, we must evolve not only ourselves, we must also redefine and evolve the martial arts, along with us.

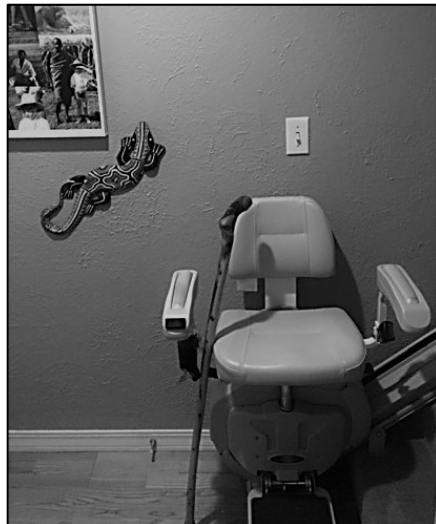
In this work I don't mean to offer you a *how-to*, or a martial-techniques book so much as I want this be a reflection and a sharing of accumulated perspective. This work is not so much me *telling you what to do* as you age in your practice of the martial arts—it's more *me telling you how to think* about your aging as you evolve *with* your martial arts.

And yes, the art itself must change as it ages—not just we humans. As any other living thing, the martial art, itself, when faced with changes, has the same three choices as we practitioners. To evolve ourselves is not enough. We must also evolve the martial art itself, as evolution is the only choice where it does not leave us or die.



Some years after the monkey rolls, I knew I was too old to train or even teach Goju Ryu Karate like it should be trained and taught. So, I persisted in teaching only Daitoryu, as half of the martial curriculum of this koryu art were seated techniques. I had resisted teaching Karate from a chair. Years before, I had watched an old war horse of a Karate Man have to teach while seated. It broke my fuckin' heart. I vowed then, as a vital Karate Man, I would never teach martial arts while sitting in a chair. But, then I was. Then I did.

I sat on a stack of mats and had my students grab me, choke me, punch and kick me. I demonstrated the seven basic Daitoryu techniques from a seated position. Of course, at that time, I taught only part of my Daitoryu classes while sitting down. I was old, but not crippled, and I still taught standing techniques and joined in randori at the end of the class. I enjoyed the fighting, albeit, it damn near did me in. For a few years, I somewhat successfully taught Daitoryu as an aging sensei.



Then, my widowed mother died. The day after I kissed mom's cold forehead as she lay there in her room at the nursing home, I fell down a dozen times. That day after mom's death, I would be walking normally, and then due to excruciating and debilitating lower back spasms, my legs would buckle and I would end up on the ground, struggling to get up. Then—overnight—I could not walk at all.

I chalked it up to stress and grief. I had lost both a mother and father in the past year. My old-man regimen had evolved from training at the dojo three days a week, and teaching twice a week to just teaching twice a week. As well, my training had evolved from running forty miles a week to walking ten miles a week.

But now, I could not get off the couch to go teach, and could not walk to the bathroom without great effort, despite I was driven by great need. Finally, I even started to use a urinal. I had grown into a cripple, totally unable to train, teach or even walk. And I had never seen that coming. One day teaching class and walking a bit over a mile, the next day couch-ridden, peeing in a jar.

I gutted it out at mom's funeral. I carried her to her grave while leaning on the pastor for support. I went home fell down getting out of my truck, and had to yell for help. My neighbors helped me get up off the driveway where I had fallen between the truck and the porch. I walked into my house and collapsed onto the couch. I had no idea what was wrong with me. That afternoon and evening, I laid there on the couch watching Kung Fu movies. I rolled off the couch and crawled to the bathroom to relieve my bowels. I crawled back to the couch. I decided that the next day I would drive to the doctor to see what the hell was wrong with me.

Rather than crash my truck, I had to have a friend drive me and help me walk into the hospital Emergency room. The Emergency nurse gave me a gown and pulled the curtain closed, telling me a physician would be in to see me. I fell three times in the emergency room trying to put on that damn gown. A male nurse came into the room after he heard the ruckus. I smiled at him from the floor. He was strong as hell, and man-handled me onto the bed.

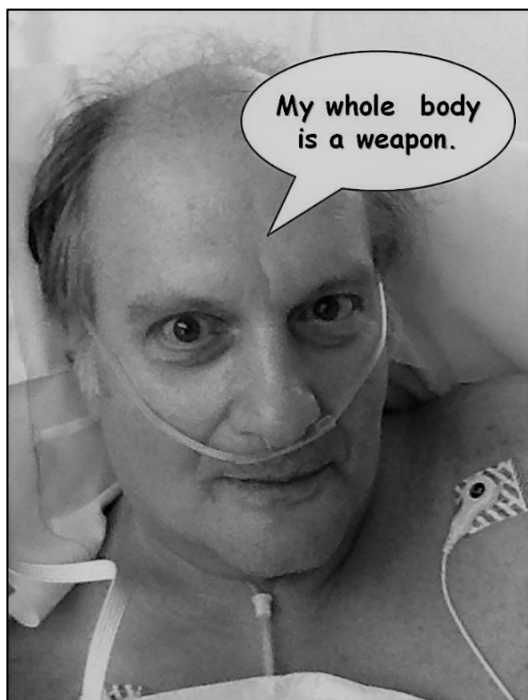
After hours of x-rays, tests and a full-body MRI, they sent me home. I lay there on the couch like a slug.

It was not the best of news. I had multiple-level spinal stenosis in L2-L5, as well as stenosis in both slots in the hips where the spinal nerve truncates and goes down each leg. Stenosis is the growth of arthritic deposits in the nerve channel of the vertebrae—putting pressure on the spinal nerve. The resultant pressure on the spinal nerve causes neuropathy and loss of feeling and use of everything below the lumbar region affected. Stenosis was described to me as a chronic disease of old age that would likely get worse, the older I got.

In addition to the spinal and femoral stenosis, I had bulging discs between L3, L4, and L5. In addition, my hips were seriously degenerated—the right hip totally bone-on-bone—the ball and socket actually fusing together. Virtually every joint in my body was in one stage of arthritic decay or another. Looking at my X-rays and scans, the orthopedist said, “Gary, you have used up your body.”

After a couple of weeks of rest, slug-like on the couch, peeing in a jar, I began to use a walker. I went into the dojo and many of my dojo siblings and students made much bother over me. And I hated it. I hated the inability. I hated being a crippled old man. And I was in

no position to even think about taking the floor. It was that night after visiting the dojo, I began to dream about kata.



After I quit running due to the hip and knee pain, and started walking, I started to have dreams where I was, once again, running. I would regularly dream of running. Now, I began to have dreams where I was doing kata like I had before. I dreamed of doing kata. It was bitter sweet. Sweet while the dream lasted, and my Shishochin was strong, fully extended and rooted in solid stance—bitter when I woke up and had to pee in the jar 'cause I wouldn't make it to the bathroom without pissing myself.

During rehab, my in-home nurse set me up with a regimen to regain my ability to walk. One of the

exercises, she lectured to me, "is hard to explain—people aren't used to doing this type of exercise."

The exercise was, for me, like an old friend. Imagine doing Sanchin...while laying on your back, with a pillow under your knees. It was a mix of Qi Gong and Sanchin, but done laying on your back. And like Sanchin, there was ebuki breathing from the belly, and the energy focused and generated in the tantien.

The point is, this modified—evolved form of Internal Art and Kata Sanchin, was being used as a training means that would eventually get me to walk again. And both the martial arts and I had evolved—together. We were, once again, involved in the pursuit of a healthier body, and doing so was also good for my *mind* and *spirit*. Mind-Body-Spirit was, again, the goal—and an old friend.

I accepted the fact that I had to evolve and change. But I also had the perspicacity to know that the art had to change with me. Through such change and evolution, I was able to find at least a faint path that felt something akin to my old path of training. My training had always been a shugyo. Now, it was even more purely so. And thankfully, my supine Sanchin and Qi Gong training paid off. Granted, it was a lot slower than I wanted, but I graduated from a being a cripple to using a walker, then crutches, and finally using only a cane.

As I became more mobile, I started to include modified kata training in my regimen—but mostly focused on mixing in my walking therapy with rounds of kata Sanchin and Tensho. I focused more on stance—gripping the floor with toes—and moderate ebuki breathing—and less on muscle contraction.

And late in the cold winter afternoons on the prairie of Nebraska, I would drive to the dojo and walk my rounds of the dojo floor—approaching the walking like a

moving Zen meditation called *Kinhin*. Every third circuit of the dojo floor, I would do a round of Kata Sanchin, alternated with Tensho. I would then continue my circuit of *Kinhin*, and enter my contemplative practice—focused on my breath. I let my cane's sound on the wood floor be my mantra. Its steady rhythm sounded like a heartbeat in the empty dojo. The path along the perimeter of the wooden floor offered a simple embusen for this kata of a crippled old man. For a few years, that was the nature of my martial training: Eighteen circuits of *Kinhin* walking, interspersed with three rounds each of Kata Sanchin (no turn, just forward), and Kata Tensho.

My solitary dojo training did serve to strengthen my legs and improve my balance. As well, the *Kinhin* allowed me to experience a spiritual satori equivalent to that I had attained before, only through the demanding, physical exertion of *shugyo*.

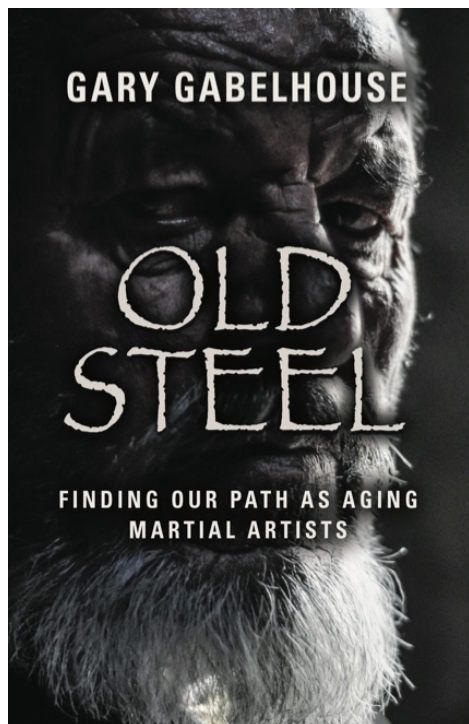
So, faced with the betrayal of my body and my martial training, I adapted and evolved. I totally changed my perspective of what training really could be for me, and how I could truly find value in that training.

And so it worked for me. Evolution. Evolution of myself, and evolution of my training. Evolution of how I approached the art itself. The training of my mind, body and spirit was successfully performed every day. But no longer did the training include the white heat of exhaustion and the agonizing strain of muscle and tendons loaded to breaking. It was none of that.

Instead, it *was* the mantra of a cane tapping on a wood floor, as an old man slowly walked the circle of the dojo. And on every third circuit of the sacred embusen, the old man, his cane leaning strategically against a wall,

would enter the gates of the kata's mandala, not with ferocity, but with the humility that comes from being totally broken, but born again as an old man, with both the weakness and magic of a child.





*Old Steel is a personal chronicle about how we must evolve and rethink our martial training and teaching, as we age.*

*Gabelhouse offers a narrative of how we can positively evolve our martial training and teaching through the changes and challenges of old age.*

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