

# THE SECRET OF INNER STRENGTH

BY CHUCK NORRIS  
With Joe Hyams

**In his amazingly candid and inspirational new book, *The Secret of Inner Strength: My Story*, Chuck Norris reveals for the first time his rapid-transit-to-Rolls-Royce life story. On his way to becoming a world karate champion and world-class film star, Norris developed an extraordinary personal philosophy of positive force that transformed his life and led him to trade obscurity for greatness. Earning his black belt in Korea at age 20 was, in Chuck's own words, "the major turning point in my life."**

*Following graduation from North Torrance High School in southern California, Chuck Norris' goal was to join the police department, but he was too young. He figured if he entered the U.S. Air Force he could join the Military Police and gain some experience in police work. In August 1958, at age 18, he enlisted in the Air Force, and one year later was sent to Korea. He had no idea that his introduction to karate in Korea would have a profound personal and professional impact on his life. Moreover, earning his black belt, his first successful personal achievement, was the central catalyst which led to later accomplishments that, today, are widely recognized and documented.*

*But back when Chuck Norris was just another kid in karate class, he faced and overcame, with courage and conviction, all the fears and anxieties that all martial artists face in their quest from beginner to black belt. Here, in his own words, Norris explains how he made black belt and discovered the first components in his formulation of the secret of inner strength.*

When I arrived at Osan Air Base in Korea, I found that there were four things I could do with my spare time: (1) hang around the barracks and play cards, (2) booze it up, (3) enroll in an academic class, or (4) study the martial arts. Judo was the only martial art I had heard of, so I joined the judo class on the base. I

had never learned any basic defensive skills and was not confident in my ability to handle a crisis, but I didn't want to spend my life worrying about the possibility of one.

A troublesome situation had occurred one night at Gila Bend, Arizona, just before I left for Korea. While on base patrol, I got a call for assistance: a drunk sergeant was causing a ruckus at the NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer's] Club. When I arrived there I saw a mountain of a man tearing the place apart. I went over to him and said, "OK Sarge, let's cut it out." Suddenly he grabbed me by the shirt and threw me across the room. I had no intention of drawing my .45, and I didn't think my billy club was going to do much good. While I was considering my next move, the MP sergeant, a big man himself, came in and resolved the situation before someone got hurt — most probably me.

During my first two weeks of judo training, I became ill with diarrhea, probably from drinking the local water. Most of the soldiers I had come overseas with had already finished their bouts with the illness. I was determined to avoid it by imbibing only soft drinks. When I started training in judo, however, I perspired a lot and needed water to keep from dehydrating. I finally took the plunge. Literally. My barrack mates kidded me unmercifully as I dashed back and forth between the barracks and the latrine.

As luck would have it, just as I was getting well I broke my shoulder in an awkward fall to the judo mat. On the other hand, maybe it was good luck that it happened when it did — it would've been a bear to run to the latrine every few minutes with my shoulder taped up.

A few days after my accident, I went for a walk at dinnertime through the village of Osan with its straw huts and shabby market stalls. The aroma of *kimchi* (cabbage cooked with garlic) was almost overpowering in the narrow

alleys. On the outskirts of Osan, I heard fierce yelling and saw people's heads popping up over the top of a hill. Curious, I walked up the hill to see what was going on. Several Koreans in white *gis* (martial-arts uniforms) were jumping up in the air and executing spectacular kicks. I had done some gymnastics in high school, but I hadn't known that the human body was capable of such amazing feats. I wanted to ask them what they were doing, but I was apprehensive about interrupting them.

When I returned to the base I told my judo instructor, Mr. Ahn, what I had seen. I asked if he knew what it was. He



told me that it was a style of Korean karate called *tang soo do*, the art of empty-hand fighting, utilizing feet and hands as weapons. In those days, karate was only a word to me. I asked Mr. Ahn what he thought about my training in karate until my shoulder healed. He said it might be a good idea and introduced me to Mr. Jae Chul Shin, the chief instructor. There weren't many Americans training in martial arts in Korea at that time, and we had a sorry reputation for not sticking with it. But thanks to Mr. Ahn's recommendation I was accepted as a student.

Mr. Shin gave lessons outside on the hard ground, in an area walled in by bamboo fences. There were twenty students, most of them Korean black belts, with only a few Americans. Everyone, including the beginners, just jumped right into the class and tried to struggle along. The theory was that if you want-

ed to learn, you learned, but no one actively encouraged you. The Koreans were not into the psychology of teaching. The other students were indifferent to me, and I did my best to keep up with them.

During the first few weeks of training on the hard ground I had a problem with my feet, which had always been tender. When I was an infant and my mother didn't want me to run around, she would take off my shoes and put me in the front yard. She knew I wouldn't get up and walk. I don't know why my feet were so sensitive; they just were. It took time for them to toughen up.

The daily training sessions were five hours long, Monday through Saturday.

**We started fighting and I punched him. That didn't faze him, so I kicked him. He dropped. I was astounded. The kicks I had been practicing really were effective.**

I was not limber, and the stretching exercises we had to do before each class were pure agony for me. Classes started at 5:00 P.M., when I finished my duties at the base, and ended at 10:00 P.M., with five minutes' rest between each hour.

For the first twenty minutes of each day's session we warmed up by punching from a wide stationary stance. Then we practiced blocking punches for forty minutes. For the next hour we practiced the different kicks: front, side, round, and back. We spent the third hour working in pairs, with one partner blocking and countering the other's punches or kicks with kicks or punches of his own; then we reversed the procedure, with the partner who had earlier attacked now doing the blocking and countering. We ended the hour with



Photo courtesy of Chuck Norris

those flying kicks in the air that I had first admired. For the fourth hour we did *heians*, choreographed movements fighting an imaginary opponent. During the final hour we free-sparring or fought against each other without making contact.

It was the same routine day in day out. It never varied, and it was especially

difficult for me since I had only one good arm and no one was any easier on me because of my injury. Also, I was not in particularly good physical shape, nor was I especially well coordinated. Actually, the fact that I was on such a low physical level probably worked to my advantage. As a teacher myself, I have found that pupils who start with

less natural physical ability are often more determined to develop, whereas students with tremendous ability often don't have the desire to achieve. That's why I never get excited about someone who is extremely well coordinated. I much prefer the more determined student.

After my arm healed, I continued to study judo for four hours every Sunday, my one day off from karate.

There were many nights when I went to bed so stiff and sore that I had to sleep on my back. But subconsciously I had been looking for a way to change. I felt that would happen with karate. Despite the agony of training, I said to myself, "If I can stick with this, I can stick with anything." I was learning discipline by developing the ability to do something that was never easy, not always pleasant, and about which I was not always enthusiastic. I had not set my mind on achieving any particular goal, such as becoming a black belt. And I had no inkling that karate would one day become the focal point of my life or that in eight years I would become the world champion.

Korea basically has three different climates; hot, cold, and rainy. For good reason, it's known both as one of the hottest places in the world and as one of the coldest. The summer temperature can soar to over 100°, with one-hundred-percent humidity. When it gets cold it also rains, and icy winds knife through Arctic gear. There's just no way to get warm.

In bad weather we trained in a Quonset hut. Training wasn't so bad when it was cold, because all that exercise built up body heat. During the hot weather we trained outdoors, but the air was so humid that within weeks I came down with a rash known as Korean Krud. The flesh started peeling off my thighs from the humidity and from the friction of my legs when I worked out. I had to go to the hospital for three days until I was cured.

It took time for Korean black belts to accept me, but when they saw how determined I was to learn they became more friendly. Part of my enthusiasm for karate was due to the fact that it was one of the few sports in which the only person you compete against is yourself. Soon I became one of Mr. Shin's most dedicated students.

In Korean karate a lot of emphasis was placed on toughening up the hands in order to be able to break boards and bricks, the theory at that time being that if you could hit hard enough to break a solid object, you could certainly damage an opponent. To strength-



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en my hands I used to carry a rock with me at all times. I held it in one hand and beat on it with my other fist to get and keep calluses on the knuckles.

When I was in my third month of training, Mr. Shin announced that we were going to put on a demonstration in the village of Osan. Toward the end of the demonstration he stacked up eight roofing tiles. He looked around at our group.

had broken my nose and I had re-broken my hand, which had to be put back into a cast.

I wrote to my wife, Dianne, daily. tell-

**Despite his demanding schedule, Chuck Norris still makes appearances at martial arts events. Here he poses with Bill Wallace (left) and boxing champ Thomas Hearns (right).** Photo by Michael Deubner



"You," he pointed to me. "you break!" I felt my heart suddenly banging against my chest. I was honored that Mr. Shin had chosen me even though I'd never broken anything before, and I knew he would lose face in front of the villagers if I refused. I'd seen black belts break bricks, so I crouched over the tiles as they had and lined up my two knuckles on the top of the stack. I took a deep breath, exhaled, and went for it. But as my hand came down I twisted my wrist, and the small knuckles in my hand took the force of the blow. The pain was horrendous; my hand was broken. Mr. Shin had no comment. That was the Korean way of teaching: the student learned through trial and error.

Soon after my hand was out of the cast, I went into the village with a friend for a few beers. My friend got drunk and started an altercation with one of the waitresses. I thought he was going to hit her, so I grabbed him and told him to cool down. He spun around and hit me flush in the nose. We started fighting, and I punched him. That didn't faze him, so I kicked him. He dropped. I was astounded. The kicks that I had been practicing really were effective! But he

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ing her about my training. She apparently mentioned it to a police officer who shopped in the market where she worked. He was horrified. "My God, have him stop studying karate," he said. "He'll come home a killer." Dianne wrote and told me, "Stop taking that stuff." But by that time I had been promoted to red belt (a level just below black belt) and had no intention of quitting.

I had developed a certain amount of ability and began to enjoy it. I no longer got sore and stiff, and I was fascinated with the kicks, especially the spinning back kick, which I was finally perfecting.

For that kick, which would eventually become my trademark, I had learned to face my opponent and then turn my

back to him at the same time my foot shot out. The power came from a backward snap of the hips; the leg was bent until contact was made, and then it straightened out. In the beginning this was a difficult kick for me because it took more balance and coordination than a front kick.

Part of the power of the kick came from the mind. It was the mind that synchronized the spinning of the body, the pivoting of the hips, and the thrusting of the leg. The mind caused the air to be forced out the lungs and the muscles of the abdomen and leg tense on contact.

As I got into better shape, I was beginning to feel better about myself, because I was training both body and mind. The fact that for the first time in my life I had stuck with something and had not given up brought about mental development. That combination of discipline and learning led to confidence, a stage of inner strength.

It took about six months, but as I became more proficient in the martial arts many of my psychological insecurities started to subside. I was becoming more communicative and assertive, and I had a better self-image. My attitude towards others began to change. A few months after I started training, this new personality began to show: I was chosen Airman of the Month.

I also found that I was a member of a very elite brotherhood whose members were extremely loyal to each other. One night a Korean Air Policeman, who worked as an interpreter on the base, was going home through an alley that, like most alleys in Korea, was so narrow that people had to turn side ways to pass each other. Suddenly he was jumped by six "slick boys," young Korean muggers. One of the attackers had a knife. The Air Policeman raised his hand to ward off the blow, and the others jumped him. He was beaten up and robbed. It happened that the Air Policeman was a black belt in *tang soo do*. When the slick boys found this out, they printed an apology in the local paper. It didn't do them any good. When you mess with one black belt, you take on the whole organization. One of our members tracked the attackers down. He killed one and injured two. The police prosecuted him, and he was sentenced to three years in prison. But he was out in two weeks.

After almost a year of daily practice, Mr. Shin told me I was ready for my black-belt test. Now every move I made would be observed by critical eyes. Mr. Shin and the other black belts mercilessly drilled me over and over on the

various *heians* on which I might be tested and that I had already practiced to exhaustion hundreds of times. Every other technique I had learned was sharpened by constant criticism: "Press your hips forward...lift your knee higher...up...more spirit...do it again...bring the fist back with a snap...turn the toe in...keep the heel straight...don't hold your breath...breathe with the blow...relax...only tense when you need to...relax...don't be so tense.

I was a nervous and physical wreck by the time I was scheduled to face the Board of Examiners in Seoul. My sergeant let me borrow a truck from the car pool for the forty-mile drive. It was the dead of winter. The roads were icy, and the drive took two hours. I arrived stiff with cold at the dojo (training hall) where the test was to be held.

The dojo was a big unheated building; wind was blowing through open spaces in the walls, designed to be windows. It was -8° inside as well as out. I changed into my *gi* and joined the other students kneeling along one side of the building. I was the only one from my school among two hundred strangers, other karateka there to test for various ranks. The Board of Examiners, including the president of the Moo Duk Kwan Association (our parent organization), were in front at a table that held a stack of examinations cards.

I watched as the others did their forms and free-sparring with selected black belts. At first I compared myself to the other novices and watched with interest. Within half an hour, however, my mind could only focus on how cold and stiff I was from sitting on my knees, unable to move. After about three hours of sitting with body and mind numb, I heard my name called.

I went before the examiners, bowed, and heard someone tell me to do a *heian*. I couldn't remember the form I was to do, even though I had done it countless times. My concentration had been broken by the cold and my nervousness. I told the examiners the *heian* didn't come to mind. I was ordered back to my place. I had to wait four more hours, until the others finished testing, before I could leave.

I was miserable on the drive alone back to the base. Over and over again I did the *heian* I had forgotten in my thoughts, then I decided to put the experience out of my mind. If I dwelled on it, I would be prepared to fail again. I had to prepare to succeed, and I had to begin planting those seeds now. Subconsciously, I was beginning to evolve a philosophy of inner strength.

Mr. Shin said nothing about my failure.



I trained for an additional three months before he suggested that I take the exam again. I had put the first exam out of my mind and only saw myself succeeding this time. I visualized myself doing the form perfectly, any form that was requested. And I saw myself completing the rest of the test successfully.

This time I was better prepared to deal with the physical and psychological hardships. The test was just as grueling as the previous one, but I was ready when my name was called. I did my forms and some one-step punching and board breaking, and then I free-sparring against a black belt. Everything went as I had visualized. When I returned to the base I felt better about myself. I had done the best I could.

A few weeks later, Mr. Shin took me aside after class. Smiling, he told me I had passed the exam. He bowed formally and presented me with a new black belt with my name written on it in Korean and a silver pin for my lapel. That pin was soon to take on a special significance for me.

One night a few weeks later, I was walking in the village in civvies when five slicky boys started to attack me. I was preparing to confront them when they saw the pin on my lapel. They scattered. I felt like Clark Kent wearing his Superman costume.

By the end of my tour of duty [in Korea] I had been promoted to Airman First Class. Not only did I have a first-degree black belt in tang soo do; I had earned a third-degree brown belt in judo as well.

**Early Kings of the Karate Ring:** (left to right) Bill Wallace, Chuck Norris, Mike Stone, and AlGene Caraulia.

Earning my black belt changed my life; for the first time in my life, I had accomplished something difficult on my own. I had belief in myself and the strength to accomplish more. Every success gives you the strength to go on to further success. I also found that working toward a goal was even more rewarding than achieving it.

Earning my black belt meant I was ready for more advanced study; I was well aware that I was still a student. One thing I had learned is that there was always someone better. Even the masters had masters. But one of the best things about karate training was that I no longer worried about my ability to take care of myself. Usually, a man fights because he wants to prove he is better or tougher than someone else; with nothing to prove, I had no need to fight.

**The Secret of Inner Strength: My Story is Chuck Norris' first and only authorized autobiography. It was written with veteran martial artist and best-selling author Joe Hyams. This infinitely inspirational book is available in hardback through the PMA. Item #265. Price: \$16.95 plus shipping.**

**In his office at Cannon Films, Chuck meets with world kickboxing champions Saskia van Ryswyk of Holland and Don Wilson of Los Angeles.**

Photo by Marketcom

