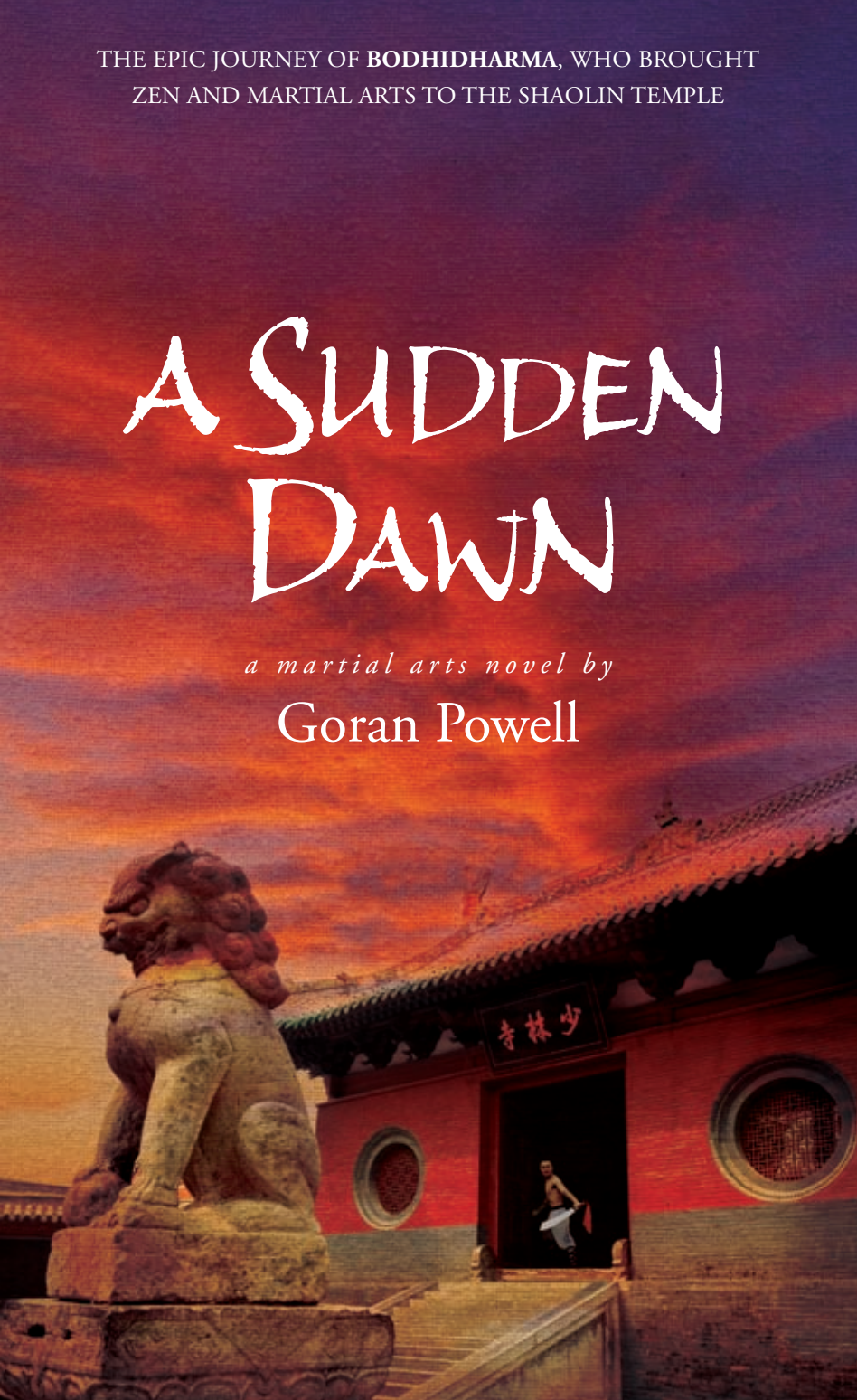
THE EPIC JOURNEY OF **BODHIDHARMA**, WHO BROUGHT ZEN AND MARTIAL ARTS TO THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE

A Sudden Dawn

a martial arts novel by

Goran Powell



PROLOGUE

Pallava, South India, A.D. 507

The Lotus Sermon

As the sun set over the southern kingdom of Pallava, a vast crowd gathered in a park in Kanchipuram, the elegant state capital. People had come from all over the city. Many more had traveled from the ports and fishing villages of the palm-fringed coast. Some had even journeyed from the remote villages of the interior. They had all come for one reason—to hear the words of the renowned Buddhist master Prajnatara. It had been many years since Prajnatara had spoken in public and the warm evening air crackled with expectation.

However, there was one young man among the throng who had no interest in the ramblings of an old monk. His name, like his father's, was Sardili; and his only interest was in getting home after a long day of training at the Military Academy. He was halfway across the park when he caught a glimpse of a skinny little man sitting apart from the crowd. At first Sardili imagined it was a hermit, come to join in the occasion, but when he noticed all eyes on the little man and heard Prajnatara's name spoken in awe, he realized it was the master himself.

The crowd was waiting for Prajnatara to begin his sermon, but Prajnatara simply held a flower aloft and gazed at it in silent

wonder. Sardili paused to see how long the little master would keep such a multitude waiting. People grew restless and called out to Prajnatara urging him to speak, but if he heard them he did not respond. A mischievous young boy went forward and shook the master by the shoulder, but Prajnatara ignored him and continued to gaze at his flower. One of Prajnatara's disciples gently ushered the boy away.

Sardili grew tired of waiting and turned to go, but at that very moment, Prajnatara spoke.

"Sit with me."

His voice was powerful for such a small man, and oddly compelling. Those nearest him began to sit. When those behind saw what was happening they followed, until the entire multitude was seated before him. Then, Prajnatara held up the yellow lotus that he had picked from a nearby pond, and refocused his gaze upon it. Sardili wondered whether some strange magic was about to occur. Perhaps the flower would burst into flame or be transformed into a bird and fly away. He waited. No magic took place. Bored with watching, he rose to leave, but, just then Prajnatara spoke again.

"A thousand years ago, when The Buddha was coming to the end of his life, there was great debate about who would be his successor. Who among his followers understood his wisdom most completely? A gathering was organized to decide the matter, the last The Buddha would ever attend on earth, and it took place in a beautiful park not unlike this one, in northern India."

Sardili sat again, compelled to listen to the master's tale.

"Many thousands of people came to hear The Buddha's final sermon. But instead of giving a lengthy speech as he usually did, he simply waded into a pond and pulled up a lotus. He showed it to his followers and, like you, they wondered what to make of it. Even his most senior disciples were puzzled. Normally, The Buddha spoke for hours and they listened, hoping that if they listened

for long enough they would become enlightened like The Buddha. But now, in the most important sermon of his life, The Buddha did not have a single word to say.

"Eventually, some of The Buddha's disciples began to debate and speculate on the meaning of the flower. Hearing them, The Buddha rose and held up the flower to each of them in turn. Each disciple guessed at its meaning, hoping to become The Buddha's successor. The flower was Heaven? The root was Earth? The stem was The Buddha's doctrine, which joined the two? Each tried in turn, offering a new suggestion, until finally The Buddha came to Kasyapa, the last of his disciples, who said nothing and simply smiled at his master. With that, The Buddha gave the flower to Kasyapa and turned to address the multitude. 'All that can be said has already been said,' he told them. 'That which cannot be said has been passed to Kasyapa.' And that is how Kasyapa became The Buddha's successor."

The crowd was silent, awaiting an explanation, but instead, Prajnatara returned to his silent contemplation of the lotus. People called to him to clarify the meaning of his story, but he ignored them and continued to gaze at the flower. Sardili wondered what Kasyapa had seen in the flower to make him smile. He stared at Prajnatara's lotus to see if anything would become apparent. He even smiled as Kasyapa had done, but saw no new meaning in it.

The crowd began to disperse, bemused and disappointed, but Sardili remained with a handful of others watching the flower, intrigued to know its meaning. As darkness fell, Prajnatara's disciples lit torches, while their master continued his silent study of the lotus. Hours passed. Shortly before midnight, Sardili accepted that Prajnatara would make no further revelations. The hour was late. His parents would begin to worry. He rose and left the little master still seated in the park and gazing at his flower as if he were seeing the most precious thing in the world.

Over the following days, the riddle of the Lotus Sermon returned to Sardili many times. Each time it puzzled him more. Days turned to weeks and still the riddle did not leave him. Instead, it grew into an obsession that gnawed away inside him, a terrible itch he could not scratch. He became distracted in his studies at the Military Academy. In lectures he no longer challenged the strategies of his teachers, as he had once done so keenly. In sparring matches, his opponents tagged him with practice blades, something none had succeeded in doing for many years. In training with real swords, his mind wandered to the lotus and he opened a deep gash in his own calf. His instructors grew concerned and visited his father, the renowned General Sardili.

The next morning the young Sardili was summoned to his father's office. It was at the far end of the Sardili residence and away from the distraction of the general's large family. That part of the house had always been kept free of noisy children and chattering servants. Only a steady stream of military personnel had come and gone at all hours of the day and night. Sardili knocked. Normally the general's adjutant would answer, so Sardili was surprised when his father appeared quickly and greeted him with a broad smile.

The general was an imposing figure. He towered over other men, not just because of his size—though he was tall, and built like a bull. There was a certainty in him that bent others to his will. His deep rumbling voice carried effortless authority and his piercing eyes held lesser men captive in their gaze. The general had always towered over him too, but now as he entered the study, the young Sardili noticed he was half a head taller than his father.

"Sit down young man," the general said cheerfully, and Sardili felt himself drawn into his father's irrepressible warmth. It was a side of the general few soldiers had seen, but one he had enjoyed

often enough as a boy. "How are you?" his father boomed. "We haven't spoken for some time. I've been preoccupied with affairs of state. You know how it is. My retirement hasn't brought the peace I was hoping for."

"You're too young and fit to retire, father. Everyone knows that," Sardili said dutifully.

"That's good of you to say, but I'm not fit now, not as I once was. Not as you are now." Then the general's face grew serious. "Anyway, enough about me. Let's talk about you, my son. One of your instructors from the Academy visited yesterday. We had a long talk. A good talk. He says you're an outstanding young soldier, the finest the Academy has ever produced. He tells me you're unbeaten in both armed and unarmed combat for the last five years, and at the trials earlier this year, no one lasted more than a few seconds with you in the arena."

The general had been pacing the room restlessly as he spoke, and now he stopped and threw up his hands in defeat, "I must confess, I knew you were talented, but even I was surprised to hear this. You don't think to inform me of your achievements?"

"I'm sorry, father," he shrugged. "I didn't think you'd be interested."

"Of course I'm interested! I like to hear of your progress. No one is prouder of you than I, Sardili. You must know that."

"These things come easily to me," he said modestly.

"That's understandable. You are a Sardili of the Warrior Caste. It's in your blood."

Sardili smiled. He had heard the same thing countless times before and waited for his father to get to the point. The general rarely engaged in idle chatter and Sardili knew he had been summoned to for a reason.

"Your studies are also going well, I hear …"

"Yes, father."

"Good. That is important, too. Soldiering is not all about brute strength you know. Your instructor tells me your understanding of strategy is advanced, and you're well versed in the classics, the Vedas …"

"Yes, father."

"When you graduate at the end of the year, there's a place waiting for you in King Simhavarman's Royal Guards. I served in the Guards myself, as you know. It's the best start any soldier could wish for, the finest regiment in all of India."

"Yes, father."

"Nevertheless, your instructor also mentioned that you have been a little, how did he put it …distracted, recently …" His father paused, giving him a chance to comment, but Sardili simply waited for him to continue.

"I have to say that I have noticed the same thing," his father said eventually. "Would you agree?"

"Perhaps," he shrugged.

"Is something wrong, Sardili? If there is, you can tell me. We're both grown men now, after all. A woman, perhaps …?"

"No," he said, reddening.

"A man, then?" his father laughed, squeezing his shoulder playfully.

"No!"

"Well what is it then? Speak up now boy," the general ordered gently.

"You'll think it strange," Sardili said.

"I have seen and heard many strange things in my lifetime," the general smiled.

Sardili shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I saw a prophet, a few weeks ago, in the park."

"Which prophet? There is no prophet that I know of in Kanchipuram."

"His name is Prajnatara," Sardili said.

"Prajnatara?" his father snorted, "Prajnatara is just a crazy old Buddhist monk from Magadha. What has he been saying?"

"Very little," Sardili sighed, "but what he did say made me think."

His father waited for him to continue, but Sardili raised his hands, as if to say he could not explain further.

"Made you think about what?" his father persisted.

"Life, I suppose," Sardili said at last, "what we're all doing here …"

"Oh son," his father laughed, "these are big questions for one so young and best left for priests to worry about, not warriors. One day you'll lead men into battle. It doesn't pay to dwell on such matters, trust me on this."

Sardili did not reply. He did not want to contradict his father, but the general saw the determination in his son's eyes and his expression hardened.

"Remember what I've always told you. You are a Sardili. You were born to the Warrior Caste. You have trained your whole life to follow in the family tradition. Soon you'll graduate from the Academy with the highest honors and King Simhavarman himself will welcome you to his Royal Guards." His expression softened, "You'll make us all very proud, Sardili. Just keep your mind on your training a little longer and years from now, when you're old and retired like me, you can concern yourself with such questions."

"Yes, father."

"Good," his father beamed, "I'm glad we had this talk and cleared things up. Let's put it behind us and never speak of it again."

But they did speak of it again, and when they did, an argument raged in the Sardili residence unlike any before and hung over the household for weeks like the brooding clouds of the summer

monsoon.

Sardili had tried to obey his father, but the mystery of the Lotus Sermon had been too powerful. He had gone in search of Prajnatara to demand an explanation, but Prajnatara had vanished. No one knew where to find him. Sardili had tried visiting local temples and wise men seeking the meaning of the flower sermon, but none had been able to provide the answer. Eventually his father had heard of his absences and summoned him once more to demand an explanation.

It was then that Sardili told his father of his intention to become a monk, and the general's fury had known no bounds. His mother had pleaded with him tearfully, night after night. His uncles and cousins had visited and spoken with him for hours on end. His instructors had come and tried to reason with him, one after the other. He had listened to each visitor in turn, politely, patiently, seriously, but steadfastly refused to change his mind. And finally, when all arguments had been exhausted, a terrible silence descended over the household.

Sardili waited for many days, hoping his father might relent and give him his blessing before he left, but the general refused all contact with his son. He was a warrior who carried the scars of many battles, but his son's betrayal had cut him deeper than any enemy blade ever could.

And so on a bright day in spring, Sardili decided he could wait no longer. He kissed his mother goodbye, hugged his brothers and sisters, and took leave of his faithful servants before walking out of the lofty hallway into the fierce heat of the day.

On the veranda he paused to admire the beautiful gardens one last time, then walked to the gate and turned for a final farewell. His family had gathered in the entrance to see him off and behind them, he noticed a shadow. It was his father. He waited by the gate in silence until his father emerged and walked swiftly toward

him. For a moment he thought his father might strike him but the general stopped, two inches from his face, and spoke in a low growl, "You are a stubborn, headstrong boy, Sardili. You always were. Ever since you were a child, you wanted everything your own way. You were never satisfied, always striving, until you got what you wanted. And I admit that I was glad of it, because I knew it would make you into a great soldier. Now you've chosen a different path, one I know you'll follow with the same stubbornness. I only hope you don't waste your life chasing an impossible dream."

"I won't," Sardili said with a certainty he did not feel.

He looked into his father's eyes and saw the love still visible beneath the hurt and anger. He could think of no other words to say and a great sadness welled up inside him. "Goodbye father," he whispered, turning quickly to hide his tears, and walked away from his home forever.

Sardili learned that Prajnatara had gone to Sri Lanka; but when he arrived in Sri Lanka, he was told Prajnatara was in the western port of Kochi; and in Kochi he heard rumors that Prajnatara had retreated to the mountains of the interior. Three years passed and still he wandered in search of Prajnatara. He visited many temples on the way and met with many holy men. He studied the Buddhist scriptures and committed the words of the sacred Sutras to memory. He learned to still his mind in meditation. He begged for food and came to understand the virtue of humility. He starved his body of nourishment and his mind of desire. He grew weak, so weak that he saw visions of startling clarity. Yet he knew they were not the truth but merely illusions brought on by his weakened state.

Five more years passed and Sardili had become a wise and learned monk. Yet, in his heart, he felt no closer to the truth than

the day he had left home, and he began to wonder if his father had been right after all.

Still, he wandered in the southern kingdoms of India seeking Prajnatara. Another year passed and he found himself in the jungles of Pallava, less than three days' journey from his home city of Kanchipuram. On the banks of a slow moving river, he met an old ferryman who, on seeing his monk's robe, offered him free passage across the water. As they crossed, the ferryman spoke of a beautiful temple located a short distance upriver and urged him to visit it. He smiled and told the old ferryman that he was seeking a particular temple, and a particular master.

"This is Prajnatara's temple," the ferryman told him.

Sardili had heard countless false stories of Prajnatara's whereabouts, but something about the old man's gentle confidence made him follow the ferryman's directions. At a fork in the river, he saw the pale stonework of a temple, half-hidden by the jungle, just as the old man had described. It was smaller than he had imagined, the point of its stupa barely reached the surrounding trees, yet its lack of grandeur was part of its appeal. The temple was exquisitely beautiful. Sun-bleached walls were carved with scenes of The Buddha's life and inscribed with passages from the Sutras. Flowers and shrubs decorated the temple grounds, and a tranquil bathing pool glistened in the shade of a banyan tree.

The main door was unlocked. He pushed it open. The entrance was empty, but he could hear rhythmic chanting coming from the corridor that led away from the hall. He waited, expecting someone to appear. When no one came, he made his way down the dim corridor. The familiar smell of incense floated on the cool air. He came to a door ajar and peered inside. Young monks were studying the Sutras, and their earnest faces reminded him of a time when he had dedicated himself to understanding the sacred texts. Now he had begun to despise the same texts for their endless

contradictions. Not one had revealed the truth to him.

A man appeared at his side. "Can I help you, Brother?"

Sardili was startled to see it was Prajnatara staring up at him, looking no older than the day he had seen him in the park almost ten years earlier. The slight frame and soft features gave Prajnatara an almost boyish look and he stood no higher than Sardili's chest, but there was firmness in his stance that belied his gentle appearance. Sardili bowed and pressed his palms together in the traditional Buddhist greeting.

"My name is Sardili," he said.

Prajnatara waited for him to continue.

"I have come to study here, if you will accept me," he added.

"What is it you seek, Sardili?" Prajnatara asked.

"I seek what every monk seeks—enlightenment."

"And what do you suppose that to be?" Prajnatara asked, his expression puzzled, as if Sardili had brought up a fascinating new topic for discussion.

"To see the world as it truly is," he said, "to know my own mind …"

"You don't know yourself, Sardili?"

Sardili shrugged.

"Yet you have studied a long time?" Prajnatara probed.

"Yes."

Prajnatara waited for him to say more, but Sardili had no wish to elaborate. "I ask to be accepted as a student," was all he said.

Prajnatara studied him silently for a minute, then shook his head. "You are too old for this temple, Sardili. All our students are young. You won't fit in. I regret to say the answer is 'No.'"

Sardili had never been refused entry to a temple before and found himself at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry," Prajnatara continued, turning to go, "I hope you haven't come far."

"Wait, please," Sardili stepped closer, "I have come far. It has

taken me years to find you …"

Prajnatara stopped but did not look back, "You won't find what you're seeking in this temple."

"I will do whatever is necessary to fit in."

"It won't help."

Sardili put his hand on the little master's arm. "Please, Master Prajnatara, I beg you to reconsider."

"Take you hands off me," Prajnatara said icily. "One monk must never lay a hand on another in this temple. That is our sacred rule."

Sardili released him and took a step back. This was a disaster. "I'm sorry, truly. Please forgive me, it's just that …"

Prajnatara turned back to face him, looking him up and down once more as if seeing him for the first time, then slapped him hard across the face.

Sardili was stunned. In all his years at the Military Academy no blow had ever caught him so unaware. His first instinct was to strike Prajnatara down, but he fought the urge. His second was to touch his own cheek, which smarted from the blow, but he refused to show he'd been hurt.

"Now you may join us," Prajnatara said, "if you wish."

Sardili stared in astonishment at the little man who, it seemed, had so little fear for his own safety.

"What do you say?" Prajnatara demanded.

"I thought you said one monk must never lay a hand on another," Sardili said through clenched teeth.

"Did I say that?" Prajnatara asked, his eyes wide.

"Yes you did. I believe you called it a sacred rule."

"Rules are for children, Sardili."

Sardili's eyes bored into the little master's with barely contained violence.

"Make up your mind," Prajnatara smiled, turning and walking

away. He had almost reached the end of the corridor when Sardili, beaten, shouted after him, "I will join!"

Prajnatara hurried back, a broad smile on his face now. He seized Sardili's hands and clutched them to his breast, "You will? Are you sure, Sardili? I am so pleased, especially after I treated you so poorly. You would be perfectly justified in leaving and never returning. But you will stay?"

"I came to study," Sardili said struggling to control his temper, "and that's what I will do."

"Well I'm delighted to hear it," Prajnatara said happily, "but please don't be too determined my dear Sardili, as it can rather get in the way of things. Now, let me think … You can join the classes, starting from tomorrow. In the meantime I'll get Brother Jaina to show you around and help you settle in. Don't go away. I'll be right back. I'm so delighted that you came to join us, truly I am."

Sardili waited over an hour and when the little master eventually reappeared, he was accompanied by a thick-set monk with a square jaw and a heavy brow. Prajnatara introduced them to one another, and as he did Sardili thought he saw a fleeting look pass between Prajnatara and Brother Jaina. Then Brother Jaina led him away to the tiny monk's cell that would be his home for the foreseeable future.

The room was empty except for a roll of bedding on the floor and a chest for his belongings. When Brother Jaina had gone, he arranged his few possessions in the chest and sat on the floor. A great loneliness came over him, and he vowed it would be the last time he joined a new temple in search of the answers that had eluded him for so long.

The next day began with the dawn call to meditation. At the sound of the bell, the novice monks filed into the cool hall and

took their places on rows of cushions. Prajnatara was waiting at the front. When they were all seated, he lit an incense burner and rang a tiny bell to signal the start of the meditation. The sweet chime seemed to go on forever.

When meditation ended, they ate a light breakfast and studied the Sutras with one of the senior monks. With the sound of the temple gong, Brother Jaina arrived and called them outside to exercise before the searing midday heat descended. They performed the yoga asanas, which Sardili knew well and followed easily; but what happened next came as a surprise. The young monks fetched thick reed mats from the temple and laid them down on the hard earth. When this was done, Brother Jaina began to instruct them in wrestling. Sardili noticed they practiced a form that had originated in Kerala, a form now common throughout India.

Prajnatara appeared at his side. "Are you surprised, Sardili?" he asked with a smile.

"I have never seen wrestling in a temple before," Sardili answered.

"We find it helps students to concentrate if they are fit and healthy. Brother Jaina did a little wrestling in Kerala before he joined our order. Tell me, do you wrestle yourself?"

"Once, a long time ago."

"Splendid! Where did you learn?"

"My father taught me."

"How fascinating! Your father was a wrestler?"

"No. My father was a general, but wrestling was his passion. He believed all the battlefield arts could be understood if one could understand wrestling."

"Your family is from the Warrior Caste?" Prajnatara asked, warming to the subject quickly.

"Yes."

"It must have been difficult turning your back on the family

About the Author

Goran Powell began his writing career in 1991 as an advertising copywriter, and, by 1995, he was creative director of a major London advertising agency. During this period, his work won ten national and international awards. He became a freelance writer in 1999 and currently works for many of London's top agencies.

He is a regular contributor to the martial arts press and was twice featured on the front cover of *Traditional Karate* magazine. His first book, *Waking Dragons*, published by Summersdale in 2006, became an instant bestseller on the Amazon Martial Arts listing and is now in its second edition. In 2008, he edited the widely acclaimed karate book *Four Shades of Black* written by his Sensei, Gavin Mulholland.

His martial arts training spans more than thirty-five years, and today he holds the rank of 4th dan black belt in Goju Ryu Karate. He is a qualified instructor with Daigaku Karate Kai (DKK), one of the United Kingdom's leading clubs, and assistant coach to the successful Mixed Martial Arts team, DKK Fighters.

Goran Powell resides in north London, in England, with his wife Charmaigne. He has three children, Harry, Hannah, and Autumn.

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This epic historical fiction novel opens in A.D. 507 with a young Indian man named Sardili, born of the warrior caste. Sardili realizes that he would rather seek enlightenment than follow his family's military legacy and sets out on a lifelong quest for truth and wisdom.

Sardili becomes the Buddhist monk Bodhidharma, known as Da Mo in China. He travels through Tibet, brings Buddhism to China, and establishes the Shaolin Temple as the birthplace of Zen and the martial arts.

A Sudden Dawn is a refreshing take on the mythical origins of kung fu, with a good pace, enjoyable interpretation of legendary characters, and wonderfully written adventures during the long journey across Asia.

Goran Powell, 4th dan, Goju Ryu Karate. Goran is the author of the highly acclaimed autobiography *Waking Dragons*, a freelance writer and recipient of numerous advertising awards. A regular contributor to martial arts magazines, Goran has twice appeared on the cover of *Traditional Karate* magazine. He teaches and trains at DKK Karate and resides in London, England.

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