

Tai Chi Chuan: East Meets West

By Bill Simpich



Del Playa Park is one of the more pleasant spots of Isla Vista, with Frisbees whizzing by and a football or two being passed around. Another familiar image is the presence of several intent practitioners of Tai Chi Chuan, with their concentrated expressions, graceful movements, and gliding bodies. Ever so slowly, with infinite precision, they go through the traditional exercises. Some consider it an enthralling dance to the ebbing sun, as it settles into the ocean at the end of another day. Other wary citizens shake their heads and grumble, “it makes me nervous.”

These young people are members of the Tai Chi Chuan Academy in Isla Vista. Their central location is marked by the circular yin/yang, to symbolize the struggle of attaining an inner and outer balance in life. An interesting fact, not commonly known, is that the yin/yang symbol is literally

synonymous with Tai Chi Chuan. Tai Chi uses the form of physical exercise in order to reach a state of spiritual peace. Their literature describes it as a “Taoist meditative art form”, and goes on to explain that “as well as being a dance and meditation, Tai Chi Chuan is also an Oriental form of martial arts, a self-defense, and a sport.”

Founder

Master Lawrence Karol founded the Academy in August 1973. He had lived most of his life in Los Angeles, and worked for the family lighting fixture business. Attracted to the disparate Chinese Taoist community of L.A., he studied Tai Chi for three years under Marshall Hoo, who as well translated for the Acupuncture Master, Dr. Gim Shek Ju, who trained Lawrence and others in acupuncture therapy and herbology. Hoo was one of the founders of the National Tai Chi Chuan Assoc., and the Academy is an affiliate. As well, Master Karol has been continuously studying for over the past five years under third generation Grand Master Tung Kai-Ying.

Shortly afterwards, Master Karol moved to Isla Vista, with the intent of spreading the art of Tai Chi Chuan to as many people as possible. Lawrence calls it “the sacred dance”, and considers it to be symbolic of the dance of life. He feels that the creative aspects of the human body are released through the practice of Tai Chi, as the “moving meditation” offers people the vehicle to physically express the vibrancy of the life-force within all beings. Simultaneously, the receptive aspects of the human spirit are heightened, as the exercise of meshing the various muscles of the body into a harmonious motion gives many people a sense of inner peace and a different outlook on the fabric of “reality”. Lawrence feels that the union of these creative and receptive aspects forms a base for the evolution of both individual and collective consciousness.

To Master Karol, the attainment of higher consciousness is the supreme goal in life, and he emphasizes that there are many valuable paths on that route. People from all spiritual perspectives are welcome at the Tai Chi Chuan Academy, a desire for developing positive patterns of thought and living is the only requirement. “Consciousness is the core of the maturation of the mind. It animates it, and gives it life.”

The initial phase of Tai Chi Chuan is composed of 108 separate movements, which flow together into a solo meditative exercise. One must be aware of maintaining his/her center of gravity, and to fuse the movements together at a slow, sustained pace. After mastering this exercise, one can go on to a faster-paced Tai Chi techniques, or the “joined hands” meditation, which consists of two people flowing together into various postures. It is said to be an ideal “dual meditation”. Lawrence says that mastery of these skills can be easily achieved, once the patterns are well etched into one’s awareness.”

Lawrence believes that there is a “consciousness revolution” in this country, which also extends into social and political spheres. He feels that the U.S. government lacks a spirit of cooperation with its own citizens, and that the younger generation of this country is undergoing a complete metamorphosis of values and attitudes. Although he acknowledges that many people “aren’t really awake...some of us recently slipped into a daze”, he thinks that the heightened consciousness that he sees growing throughout America will manifest itself through all walks of life. He quoted a finding from Buckminster Fuller’s continuing series of World Games, which stated that “our planet has 1 1/2 acres of fertile soil and seventeen acres, 1 1/2 miles deep, of pure drinking water per entity.” He expresses confidence that a holistic blending of nature and technology can restore sanity to the planet, and that America has the inherent potential to lead the world’s communities in solving our global problems.

Acupuncture

Lawrence Karol’s interests have led him into the Oriental medical tradition of “symptomatic diagnosis”, which emphasizes prevention and early detection as well as cure. This involves the fields of acupuncture, acupressure, massage therapy, herbology, nutrition, and more. “We must draw upon the tools made available by all cultures of the earth...only in this way can we synthesize the best of the world’s cultures and supplement the deficiencies within our own.” The academy is attempting to build a community-oriented health educational program, with a one day workshop in acupressure, and a two day seminar in acupuncture therapy (which is a

comprehensive study of the fundamentals of Oriental medicine). Actual acupuncture is not practiced in the class, as the California Medical Examiners is only now approving a licensing procedure for the practice of acupuncture. Master Karol expresses confidence that he will be able to obtain the license, and hopes by the end of 1976 to initiate an acupuncture clinic in Isla Vista. He considers it vital to “take away the veil...the mysticism...from these arts and sciences, and to integrate them into our daily lives.”

Possibly the most attractive aspect of the Tai Chi Chuan Academy is its constant search for synthesis in a world of flux, while steering clear of the “only-one-true-way-to-enlightenment” syndrome that plagues so many spiritual endeavors. The Taoist outlook of the Academy cannot be characterized as a religion or a philosophy. It seems to be an unfixed attitude, geared around the principle of living and flowing with the moment—more commonly known as “be here now”. At the same time, they seem to be moving with an air of optimism towards the increased cultivation of our human potential.