

Mind and Movement

The Oriental Way

Art Wohl

Editors' Note: Art Wohl studied exercises in T'ai Chi Ch'uan with various Chinese practitioners in New York. He has taught body sensitivity and coordination to athletes, dancers, actors, singers, and the physically and mentally disabled.

He will lead a workshop in body awareness and control on December 3, from 2 to 4-30 p.m. at St. Joseph's Church, Woodward at King. The cost will be \$2 for the session which will be an intensive series of guided experiences bringing about a progressively deepening state of concentration and awareness of the body's spontaneous tendencies to release tensions and rigidities, center and realign itself, establish a state of dynamic equilibrium and to enhance its use as a vehicle for self expression.

A great deal of interest in this country has recently focused on Oriental philosophies and arts, especially the martial arts. There is an important intrinsic relationship between these two areas which is not usually understood in this country. The remarkable art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, which is little known here, can serve to clarify this relationship.

T'ai Chi Ch'uan was originally a form of moving meditation used by Taoist monks to bring about internal harmony. It is the basis of a superior form of martial art utilizing softness and sensitivity to overcome strength, and is used to promote health and longevity. In fact, it is now practiced daily by hundreds of millions of Chinese in factories, communes, hospitals, and even at bus stops and railroad stations.

To Orientals, Spirit, Mind, and Body are not "separate but equal" elements, but rather are seen as three aspects of one essential unity. Thus, any development of mind and body must at the same time be practiced as a spiritual discipline, so that the depths of man's spirits can project itself spontaneously through the medium of the mind and body.

The unity of mind, body, and spirit, then, does not imply bringing together separate elements, but -removing superficial physical and mental habits which prevent one from experiencing and expressing this inner unity. The Chinese Philosophy of Taoism, upon which T'ai Chi is based, saw education and learning not as an addition of something new to the individual, but rather as the removal of blocks which prevented the expression of one's latent potentialities, which should, they felt, come forth as naturally as a stream flowing down a mountainside.

To achieve such controlled spontaneity, however, one must first subject himself to a rigid discipline. Such a discipline is the exercise-art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. The exercise consists of soft flowing movements through balanced postures, based on the related combative art. The movements are based on carefully calculated mechanical principles, designed to permit the body to move most naturally and efficiently, and to be able to expend the maximum of force with a minimum of efforts.

Movements must be performed with exactitude and completeness. The exercise, which continues for about seven minutes must be performed with the total involvement of the mind and spirit. Most victims of modern civilization find it difficult to concentrate on such slow movements for this length of time. Our minds are so preoccupied with reaching final objectives that we resist becoming conscious of the process of getting there.

It is this expanding consciousness and kinesthetic awareness of the body as it flows effortlessly through these precise movements, always in a state of perfect equilibrium, which demands and therefore develops great mental and physical control. One finds that as his sensitivity increases, his spontaneity increases with them. The discipline, then, is no longer a means to fulfillment, but is a fulfillment in itself.

To many people, it sounds quite paradoxical to say that Oriental forms of hand to hand combat are “arts,” and are based upon profound philosophical concepts. Actually, in the Orient, combative arts often serve as disciplines through which one can become aware of his body as it acts in concert with the mind as a creative and spontaneous instrument.

The individual with whom one practices, rather than being a target for mayhem and destruction actually serves as a mirror of one’s tensions and areas of rigidity. The opposing force applied by an opponent enables one to become sensitive to the natural tendency of the body to maintain equilibrium and coordination, and to respond instantaneously with instinctive appropriateness to any situation

The ultimate point of mastery, however, comes when one has surrendered his egocentric desire to assert his superiority over another, and simply places his faith and his full presence of mind in the same physical-mental mechanism within into which enables all living things to act in accord with their natures.

In China, there are two schools of combative arts, the external school, which relies chiefly on hardness and external force, and the internal school, which was founded on the Taoist dictum which states that “the soft and yielding will defeat the hard and unyielding.” For example, water, by its patient persistence, can wear down rock, or by concentrating its force, as in a tidal wave, sweep away all in its path.

In T’ai Chi Ch’uan, an “internal” style, one cultivates a controlled softness which makes the body pliant like a babe’s, and as soft and yielding as water, yet is so perfectly attuned to its center of gravity that it is like a reed, firmly rooted, yet yielding to the elements, so that it “remains standing when oaks fall.”

The T’ai Chi boxer learns to sharpen his sensitivity so that he can “interpret” an opponent’s energy. Thus, he does not strive to defeat his opponent by aggressiveness and contention, but rather attunes himself to his opponent’s direction of force, and assists his opponent in defeating himself. Thus, like the Taoist sage, he “acts without acting.” That is, he acts without egocentric desire for victory or self assertion. His actions then become effortless and spontaneous, unhindered by tensions and mental pressures. He learns to flow with the tide of events, rather than against them, and this enables the T’ai Chi master to “deflect a thousand pounds with four ounces.”

One’s opponent, then, actually serves as a teacher, who demonstrates how unyielding rigidity of mind and body is the source of self defeat. The opponent is actually a partner, and “combat” becomes dance. That is, a rhythmic flow of spontaneous movement in which neither—or both—parties are the victors.

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