



THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

by
Mark Bassell

After studying Chen Form with Master Jou, Tsung Hwa for three years, and achieving something which is beginning to give me a little "satisfaction," I have become "embroiled" in a little bit of a running "argument" with some of my fellow practitioners.

The elements of this "disagreement" are as follows: in "The Tao of Tai Chi Chuan," Master Jou states:

Some people think that modifying Tai-Chi Chuan is simple and attempt to do so. – One who has not devoted many years of study to such an art should avoid introducing personal variations into the form, especially when teaching beginners. The situation is the same as teaching handwriting to children. – In the same way

we have our alphabets of Tai Chein Chuan, which are the postures of the standard Chen, Wu, and Yang styles of Tai Chi Chuan. It is the duty of Tai Chi Teachers to teach their students one of these standard forms, just as it is the duty of handwriting teachers to teach their students the standard letters, and in Tai Chi Chuan we have standards, since there are photographs of the great Masters of the Chen, Wu, and Yang schools.

In other areas of the book the illustrations of the form are in the form of cartoons which delineate the postures. And it is from here that our little "disagreement" begins. Master Jou has instructed us to take these

various illustrations and cartoons as "Gospel," and where his own practice differs from these standards, to use these "standards" as a higher source of teaching than his own example, and verbal teaching.

So what has started to take place is that a few people are beginning to vary the content of the form, and are substituting these "ideal" postures, at least as they understand them, and are beginning to come up with something that I find "indescribable." In all fairness, they find my own practice, and that of several others, in a less than ideal state.

Some time ago, when I was working as a salesman in a place called Colorado, my boss, who resembled a Catholic version of

"Elmer Gantry," when he waxed ebullient, used to like to lecture me on the difference between the "letter of the law" and "the spirit of the law." Considering his own religious relationship with these matters he had taken a very definite position with what he defined as "the spirit of the law". Having a certain theologic bent myself, though not of his persuasion, I found the general thrust of his approach quite appealing. Paraphrasing it roughly, I would describe it as a doctrine whereby one keeps to the original intent, very rigidly, although the form in which this intent expresses itself is very open to change.

This general philosophy, I find consistent with the philosophy of Tai Chi Chuan. In fact, as I understand it, the I-Ching says that everything is subject to change, except the basic principles. Certainly the statement that the addition of the 5 Elements in the feet, to the 8 Trigrams in the hands, creates a state of Tai Chi, indicates that the traditional placement of a finger to a certain meridian in relationship to the time of day and one's belly-button to the left toe of the inner foot does not necessarily give us the master key. All of us, have at one point or another have confronted this type of traditional Chinese teaching, which as regards what we can easily verify, causes us to either take it on faith, suspend judgement, or politely reserve contempt.

So, taking this *broader* statement of what creates a state of Tai Chi, and having a wish to allow this type of development to take place for us, personally, we can then go on being quite able to totally suspend all theory, if it does not relate to our personal experience immediately, from the immediacy of what we are then willing to work on.

Going back to the idea that Tai Chi, as a martial Art, is an expression of Nei Kung, or Internal Work, we are then free from a *mechanical martial-ity*, which is as much a disease of the modern world as it is a defense from it. If we regard self-defense, in a personal, karmic, spiritual, psychological, and physical sense, coming from a more essential revelation of one's existence, we will not feel self-conscious in an ordinary sense, in trying to define it to our peers. (I would imagine that many of us, maybe pacifistic in intent, have had difficulty trying to define our interest in this to many of our close friends.)

So I have a wish to take what I'm getting, put it into a form consistent with the Classics, that I can use, and keep it with me in my ordinary life.

The "letter of the law," in my estimation, has the tendency to create rigidity. Whether this is in Martial arts, religion, or traditional folk-dance. The Art that we are studying is a sacred thing. It is like an Ancestral Inheritance. And as such, if we are affected in any regard by the concept of behaving in a respectful fashion to those who existed before us, it appears to me that if we wish to honor their intent, we would be truly honoring them more, than if we blindly imitated their surface manifestations, even if to the best of our ability, by trying to keep their inner aims paramount. Without wishing to "pull rank" on anybody, since I feel that this type of discussion is one that transcends Tai Chi, and to one degree or another is relevant to any practitioner of *any* martial art, I really felt that I wanted to come down hard on "the letter of the law." I say this and freely admit that there are many "traditionalists" whose personal practice is superior to my own, in the sense of combat effectiveness.

Continuing this line of thought, I notice that in something dissimilar to fighting, like music, that the evolution of form has the tendency to accumulate in "styles," and then when the inspiration runs out, that the followers have a tendency to combine everything in sight, sometimes with a great deal of sensitivity, and sometimes in a very superficial manner, and that the next "quantum jump," seems to come out of this "forced experimentation." I think that having a concept of Tai Chi as a unity, and having a willingness to explore it as such, will tend to create a very balanced practitioner. (I invoke a silent, very solemn prayer, that this will not result in the formation of too many "combined forms.") I believe that a multiplicity of approach in learning has the tendency, by its nature, of resulting in internalization of the form. That is the real aim of Tai Chi Chuan.

I notice that when I allow the "twining action," or Chan Su Ching, to express itself, that since it is revolving and orbiting at the same time, that I can express lots of compound moves. Blocks, strikes, flips, chin-na, knees, elbows, kicks, etc. where before there was only a meandering form. In the ancient world *esoteric knowledge was always hidden*. The Tai Chi forms are *hidden forms*. To a certain degree, it is our responsibility to uncover them, like fossils, and bring them to the modern world. If we follow a very traditional form, how is it that this type of discovery will take place?

In the 1930's, Black American musicians had created a new form called Jazz. It was based on improvisation. It was also based on a very clear understanding of African Music and Western Harmony. The form which this took place in, although very exciting, was soon completely superseded by an intellectual revolution, in the 1940's, which added substitute chords, passing scales, alternate

chords, scalar concepts, and an acceleration of rhythm. These ideas were thoroughly in agreement with existing harmonic theory. To the average listener, much of what was played sounded formless. (Does this sound familiar?) furthermore, most of the basic suppositions of the song, or the harmonic underpinnings, were only hinted at, and the structure of the line was determined by the rhythm, a great deal of which occurred in the moment, and this then greatly multiplied series of "tonal highways" that the musicians could run down. Today this "revolutionary" music, so recently cursed at, is described as "Black Classical Music."

This is what I sense the Chen Form to be. There are signposts, and there is a "traditional" way of getting from one internal to another. There does not seem to be a rigid concept to Chen style Tai Chi. I notice that all the Chinese practitioners have a very different form. It is an internal form. Internal does not mean that 600 people doing the best they can will resemble each other the way 600 hamburgers do. Different bodies will reflect the same internal "Key" much differently than if they attempt to conform to some "external norm."

So for myself, I will look for instruction in the MOVEMENT of players who are better than me. I will not go on a fruitless search for the holy grail, or the original Chen Form. My wish is to make my own movement look beautiful, firstly, and, secondly, for my health. If I can really fight after learning this, so much the better. ■

WORKSHOPS

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2. Master Jou, Tsung Hwa will instruct this form. Students of the Yang short form will be better able to understand the derivation of their short form by studying the long form. This event is timed to occur from July 18 until July 23.

MASTER T.T. LIANG (梁) WILL BE HERE AGAIN!

3. The highlight of the summer program will once again be the appearance of the dynamic and very youthful T. T. Liang. This is scheduled for August 8 until August 12. Master Liang, who is a very flexible 88 years old, will astound you with his vitality, imagination, and informative teaching. Do not miss this one.

MASTER J.J. SOONG (宋) WILL COME FROM TAIWAN

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