

The Old Men of T'ai Chi

Professor Huo

Tai Chi is for old men. By age twenty-two I had spent some time studying T'ai Chi, but I devoted most of my time to Karate and Kung Fu. The soft forms of T'ai Chi were for weaklings as far as I was concerned.

Some of my martial art friends had begun studying the Yang family form, a so-called secret style of T'ai Chi Ch'uan with an old Chinese professor named Huo Chi Kwan. No one knew how old he was. His features were smooth and his skin soft, but by the looks of his hands, he was ancient.

I had always wondered how I could learn anything from people over fifty, since most of them have a hard time climbing a flight of stairs. Yet, I had heard some of my teachers speak about the great expertise and power of old masters who progressed as they got older. I didn't believe it!

I went to see Professor Huo Chi Kwan because heavy sparring had begun to take its toll on me. I heard that T'ai Chi had miraculous healing powers, and I felt this would be a good way to cure my injuries and strengthen my weaknesses. I could then return in a healthier condition to competition Karate. So, with all the confidence and wisdom possessed by any twenty-two year old and with a

between 190 and 2,000 pounds. In fact, he is about 5'3" tall at most and as far as weight is concerned, it falls somewhere between the weights I mentioned.

Professor Tohei and I eventually became very good friends. On one occasion we went to lunch at a French restaurant in Chicago. After some wine and cocktails, we began to talk about martial arts in general. I should mention that there is another style of Aikido, taught by Kisshomaru Ueshiba who is the son of the founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba. The elder Ueshiba is one of Professor Tohei's teachers. The younger Ueshiba and Tohei differ in their approaches. As a result, the Ueshiba camp, in typical Samurai fashion, is very critical of Tohei, for they believe that no one can teach Ki (Chi). Being able to teach Ki is the essential component of Tohei's philosophy.

Back at the luncheon, I informed Tohei Sensei that I attended a lecture given by a ninth degree Black Belt representative of the Ueshiba style and that he was most emphatic about the fact that no one can teach Ki. I believed it was directed particularly at Tohei's philosophy. Tohei responded very agreeably, shook his head almost sheepishly and said, "That's right. No one can teach Ki." He then bounded up smiling, gold crowns sparkling, looked me straight in the eye and continued, "Except me!"

Tohei's style of teaching was incredible. I have never seen anyone hold the attention of an audience and command their respect like Tohei. Going to his seminars was like attending the live performance of a rock and roll star. His dialogue was reminiscent of a great comedy. The expositions were dramatic, surrounded by tragedy, with an ironic, if not comic twist for an end, yet always happy, always laughing. You were constantly entertained as you learned.

If anything, Tohei's classes are infamous for their slapstick humor. Tohei often played the part of a disgruntled, grouchy, and egocentric person, often stomping on the floor, growling and insulting everyone and everything. Everyone would be in hysterics, and I'm sure they identified with many aspects of the character who resembled a Samurai Ebenezer Scrooge.

This type of behavior, he would inform everyone, is not the right way and to develop Ki it is very important to develop good character. I once asked Tohei, "Why do you want to develop Ki?" He responded, "To develop good character." He also reminded me that using Ki is like using a sword. It could be used for good or evil.

lit cigarette hanging from the side of my mouth, I knocked on the door of Professor Huo Chi Kwan. It was December 12, 1970.

The old man who answered was dressed in his Northern Chinese attire, all white, and in a grey cardigan sweater with six buttons, some buttoned, some not.

“Are you Professor Huo?” I asked as he opened the door.

He muttered a soft reply in a dialect of English that was almost incomprehensible. “Heh, Heh. Just a minute,” and before I knew what happened, the door was shut.

About three minutes later, he opened it again. His right hand held an empty glass, and his left hand snatched the cigarette from my mouth, extinguishing it in the glass. It all happened so quickly, yet so slowly. So slowly, that I can still remember the pale color of the single light bulb hanging from the ceiling of his bare, austere apartment in Hyde Park, Chicago.

“I’m a friend of Mr. Foster,” I said.

“Oh.” His reply came in a very soft voice. “Foster. Mr. Foster. Nice man. Coming soon. Sit down, heh, heh.”

I sat in an old wooden chair next to an old wooden table with a green tablecloth covered with many sizes and types of Chinese calligraphy pens, ink tablets, and inks. Some rice paper with some newly written calligraphy was laying across the table top. He rolled it up and sat down at the long end opposite my own.

He looked at me, smiled the most curious smile I’d ever seen, and out of his mouth came those strange utterances again. “Heh, heh.” I smiled back.

“I’d like to learn T’ai Chi.”

His smile vanished. “Uh?” he said.

“I said I would like to learn T’ai Chi.”

The tea pot in the kitchen began to whistle in perfect time so that my question went unanswered. He attended to the tea. He was in the kitchen for four or five minutes and kept walking back and forth, looking very busy.

When he finally came back, I stood up. By then I had realized that he was a very cultured gentleman and I had to use my very best

manners if we were to communicate at all. He brought only one cup and the tea had the most delightful aroma I had ever smelled. It was as though I was in a field of jasmine flowers at their peak of bloom. It smelled more like perfume than tea and though I knew it was much too hot to drink, I didn't resist. I knew I had to have a sip.

He was soft and gentle, yet something about his body gave the appearance of being carved from stone. As he returned to his chair, I waited for him to sit down. I took a sip of tea and it seemed that my tension had released from my entire body. Yet somehow I was still in a state of limbo, for it had become obvious that he wasn't going to talk about T'ai Chi. So we talked about the weather and the many paintings that covered his walls.

The entire scene lasted about thirty minutes. I had the appointment at four. Foster was to come too, but he showed up at four-thirty. When he arrived the Professor told him to sit down in a chair that was against a wall near a big bay window that opened up on to a tiny terrace. We put our coats on a bed in the far corner of a living room that measured sixteen feet by fourteen feet. This is where the classes were to be held.

The Professor put the tea on the table for Foster and Amato, but before they could drink it, he told us to change. We did so, each in turn, in a tiny bathroom that was the only other room save for a small walk-in closet. We started our lesson by doing the first three movements of the basic movement of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. The lesson lasted one hour and it contained only these movements and a discussion of basic principles. The next class was to meet the next Monday at four.

After that day, although I knew nothing about this new form of T'ai Chi I was learning, and though I knew very little about the nice old man called the Professor, I never studied another hard martial art, nor practiced any, nor wanted to. T'ai Chi was fun. It had a flavor I could taste in my mouth like no other flavor I had ever tasted. It was wonderful. I didn't care if I could use it to fight, or if the Professor was a good boxer. T'ai Chi was beautiful! It made me feel good. It made me smile.

The next week I went to class a half hour early. I had practiced my T'ai Chi every day without fail, and the idea of learning a new movement was exciting. That week we learned one movement doing it balanced on one leg with non-stop, slow, and exacting

repetitions. It hurt, but the hurt felt good. Indeed, it was still a paradox to me that these painful movements, once completed, made my body feel so good.

Eventually my lessons were private, often it felt as though we were in our own little universe. Even the dust on the floor, the plants in the room and the light bulbs took on an entirely different appearance. Practice had become for me an oasis of knowledge that brought light into the rest of my life.

The Dragon of Morse Avenue Park

I studied this way with the Professor for about fourteen months. I changed my mind about T'ai Chi being for old people and I came to believe in the power and strength of old men. Never, though, did I think I would come to believe in dragons as well! Yet, I learned a dragon did indeed live in a park on Morse Avenue in Rogers Park, Chicago. His name was Tsao Li Ming.

One afternoon I went there to visit him. Soon after I arrived, I saw an old Chinese man with a cane and a straw hat approaching. He looked very frail and the hair in his nostrils and his two front teeth gave the appearance of an old dragon that had lost his fire. I wondered how this could possibly be a T'ai Chi Master. This old man looked as if he had trouble standing and I was sure that if the wind came in too briskly off Lake Michigan, he'd be blown across the park.

He went to a bench and sat down. Three strong-looking young men approached him, apparently wanting to learn some martial arts. They gestured in certain ways as if they wanted to "play" T'ai Chi. But the old man put out his left hand, vibrating it side to side, and said in atonal English, "Nohhh. Nohhh."

Not being able to communicate, the three young men left. I still hadn't recognized that this was a T'ai Chi Master, but curiously enough, I approached him and observed him reading a Chinese book with pictures of T'ai Chi postures. I smiled and greeted him and pointed to some of the characters in the book, pronouncing them in my very poor Chinese accent. He looked up, grinned, and with a slightly open mouth said, "Ehhhhh."

Standing up, he took off his straw hat and put it down near his cane. He walked into the park, beckoning me to follow. I stood behind

him, knowing we were to begin doing the form. As he prepared, this frail old man began to expand and as he expanded he got straighter and straighter and smiled more and more. Everything about him brightened, and then he began to move. To this day I have never seen anyone move as smoothly, softly, or beautifully. This old man moved as if he had no bones.

I realized that after all my years of study, I still hadn't learned how to move; but, thank God, I had an idea of what I was supposed to do. We practiced for thirty minutes; he kept looking back at me to see if I'd tire out while he sunk lower and lower in his movements.

After we finished the form, he laughed and beckoned me to do "push hands" with him. Now, push hands is a T'ai Chi exercise usually done with two people. It uses basic techniques: ward-off, *P'eng*; roll-back, *Lu*; press, *Chi*; and push, *An*. The principles in push hands are the same as those in the solo exercise. However, more emphasis is placed on redirecting and neutralizing the external forces coming from the other person. I was amazed. His skin was as soft as a baby's, his muscles were completely relaxed and his fingertips glowed fire-red and his eyes glimmered. We touched hands. I felt something I had never experienced before, no bones. No bones! I am sure that if I ever shook the hand of a dragon it would feel exactly like that, no bones.

We began to do the push hands exercise of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, but when I began to push towards him, he "wasn't there" anymore. I felt nothing, no bones, no hands, no Tsao Li Ming. He seemed to disappear from my touch. All of a sudden, in the midst of a very slow circling movement, I lost my balance and was lifted up slightly off the ground. As I went back, I thought I'd try and see if I could get the old man. I didn't. To this day, I never have.

We pushed hands for about five minutes, after which I thanked him and smiled. He smiled back, throwing his hands up in the air and shrugging his shoulders as if to say, "That's it. That's how we should practice!"

He urged me to continue, but I didn't begin to study with him until a year later. I worked steadily with Tsao Li Ming for about seven months until he moved to San Francisco. However, we continued to keep in contact with one another.

On one of his visits to Chicago, I went to see him at his son's home. We started our conversation sociably over a cup of jasmine tea. Inevitably, we got into a conversation of T'ai Chi theory, covering

everything from the basic principles through the martial arts, even into the Theory of Alchemy. Finally we decided to “play” T’ai Chi Ch’uan. He put on his Chinese shoes and we went into the basement so as to be undisturbed.

We went through the form together, I one step behind him, one moment behind, always, nonetheless, behind him. As we went through a posture called “snake creeps down,” I saw his balance waiver, just slightly, but waiver. I’d never seen this before and wondered if maybe it wasn’t the ground that moved since the old man never moved anywhere without being rooted. In my mind I began to question his strength. Once again I would try to uproot him, for I had become stronger and I did see him waiver. I began to get confident. I knew I could get him.

We started doing push hands. I had to be as soft as I could to gain a good position in our contest. So I reached down deep, down to the very core of my being for every last ounce of strength to become as soft as I could be. For the first time while doing push hands with Tsao Li Ming, it worked! For the next ten minutes I found myself neutralizing the old man’s offense. Then, without a word between us, we both stopped. Although I did not uproot him, it was the first time the old man did not uproot me.

I was ecstatic, as I saw the old man walk away, he began to look very, very distant. The basement certainly couldn’t be that long! Then he was gone. He seemed to disappear, then, he was right next to me at my left side. His left hand pushed directly on my face, his right hand at my stomach. A stream of air rushed between his hands and my body, I was pushed back, there he was in front of me smiling and uttering that curious laugh, “Ehhhh.”

We never spoke much, but we both laughed a lot and there was lots of laughter even after this had occurred. He had gotten me again and this time with the style of a dragon pouncing on its prey.

The time I spent with Huo Chi Kwan made one hour seem like a cosmic eternity; whereas one hour with Tsao Li Ming felt like a cosmic flash, infinitesimally brief. In all of them, when Huo was Yang, Tsao was Yin; when Tsao was Yang, Huo was Yin. Huo was the tiger, Tsao the dragon.

Mr. Tsoi

During the time of my adventures with the tiger and the dragon, it was inevitable that I would encounter a Buddha on the path. Buddhas always travel incognito, but you can never miss them. They have two distinct characteristics, a round belly and a light in their eyes. The old Buddhist adage, "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha" never made sense to me. Yet, this is the lesson I would learn from my friend Tsoi.

He was a man between medium and stocky build and 5'7" in height. He had a round, radiant face and his features and mannerisms made him look like the Chinese Humphrey Bogart. I'm sure he'd say that Humphrey Bogart was the American Mr. Tsoi.

His clothes were always crisp and neat, almost as if they were painted on. He always wore a bow tie. His basic beliefs were quite simple: don't believe anything, don't trust anyone and if you're about to get into a fight, hit first and ask questions later.

I first met this "old man" in 1968. I sensed he was a martial artist and he sensed I was, but it took two years before we started to talk. He was very impressed that I always said "thank you," "please," and "you're welcome." Good manners and politeness were of paramount importance to him. People without good manners angered him.

He got angry often. As I got to know him better through the years, I began to perceive his anger as humorous. In fact, it was comic. The angrier he got, the funnier he seemed. Of course, I never let him know that I perceived him this way, as I'm sure he wanted to show me how funny people look when they get angry.

Many times he came up to the table at the restaurant where he worked and mumbled a complaint about another waiter, customer, or as usually the case, his boss. As soon as he uttered the complaint, his entire countenance would change. He would become furious, but silent. As he walked away, I would start to laugh. Then he would proceed to treat all of the customers in a manner that fit his particular mood and I would laugh all the more as he silenced his emotions and anger.

Tsoi was a chronic gambler, addicted to the horses. That was no secret. He often lectured to me for what seemed to be hours on the evils of horse racing and gambling. Yet, every Monday Tsoi would

be at the track. By the end of the day he'd be tearing up his tickets, getting very angry. The next time I would see him he would complain about how he lost his entire week's wages on the horses. He claims to have lost several fortunes there and I sincerely believe he was serious about that. He gave the impression that he was at war with the racetrack owners and his job was to get all their money so no one else would lose at the track. Tsoi would bet against insurmountable odds. He feared nothing and he quite often lost. But somehow, in his immutable way, he always appeared the winner.

I never actually had classes with Mr. Tsoi. I never fought with him, and to this day, I can't remember his first name, though I know he showed it to me one day on his ID card. He was one of the few people I knew who could translate obscure phrases in classical Chinese. His martial art postures were clear and classical as though they had been set in place by a carpenter's rule.

On one occasion I recall him walking into the kitchen of the restaurant. Usually he would carry a platter over his head with one hand, kick the door with his foot, then walk through with flowing continuity. However, this time as he kicked open the door he made a curious circle with his left hand, forming a fist. This particular technique was something I'd been trying to learn for years. It was an integral part of certain T'ai Chi postures. Somehow, watching him do it unraveled the mysteries of the form.

Tsoi, like many Chinese martial artists, was studied in the theories of Chinese medicine. He spent eleven years in a monastery somewhere in southern China. There he learned various external and internal systems. Though he claimed to be a hard stylist, he did everything softly, effortlessly, and without tension. He was one of the most relaxed men I ever met, even when he was angry. That is one reason he seemed so funny.

Often when he spoke, he would transfer weight from one leg to another, giving the appearance of a slight sway. After watching him for two or three minutes, it looked as if the whole room was swaying with him.

Along with his trips to the racetrack, he was a fan of Bruce Lee and Kung Fu movies. Of course, he found time to practice daily, and from the looks of him, diligently.

Even though he wasn't a practitioner of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, he influenced my T'ai Chi Ch'uan greatly. Yet, the influence was much more than just movement or form. It was one of attitude, the

attitude that all knowledge is within us all and that for a man to be free he must have no master, even if the Master is a Buddha.

I frequented the restaurant where Tsoi worked at least two or three times a week for seven years. Then, one day he disappeared and I never saw him again. To this day I still peer in the window of that restaurant to see if my old friend Tsoi is there. I often hear his voice as if he is whistling in the wind, whistling contently from a very distant land, a barren land where he has become content with himself. So he whistles and the land is filled with sound.

Tohei Sensei

Even in a barren land there can be many Buddhas, and it surprises me that some old Zen Master never coined the adage. “Once a Buddha, always a Buddha.”

I spent very little time with Tohei Sensei. Although many T'ai Chi Ch'uan enthusiasts become so snooty that they won't accept the greatness of someone outside their art, I have seen none stand before this man. Professor Tohei's four basic principles, and all the principles he utilizes in teaching *Shinshin Toitsu Aikido* (Aikido with mind and body coordinated,) are essentially the same as those used in the T'ai Chi Ch'uan Classics.

Koichi Tohei came to Chicago often and every time he did I attended his seminars, often taking my students with me. On one occasion I recall him touching me on the side of the neck, softly and gently with three fingers. I lost consciousness. The next thing I recall, I was lying on the mat about ten feet away. My students later told me that he lifted me up off the ground about three feet and threw me back through the air a distance of about ten feet. All I can remember is his three fingers touching me on the side of the neck and hitting the mat very softly.

Koichi Tohei was born in 1920 and though he may fit into the category of an old man by many definitions, he's the youngest person I ever met. Certainly, he is one of the most charming. So charming, in fact, that when he smiles the gold crowns in his mouth sparkle giving the impression of sun beams shooting off in different directions from a distant star.

Most people, including myself, who have spent time on the mat with Tohei Sensei, envision him as a big man. He looks to be about 5'9" tall and sometimes 7' tall. He seems to weigh somewhere