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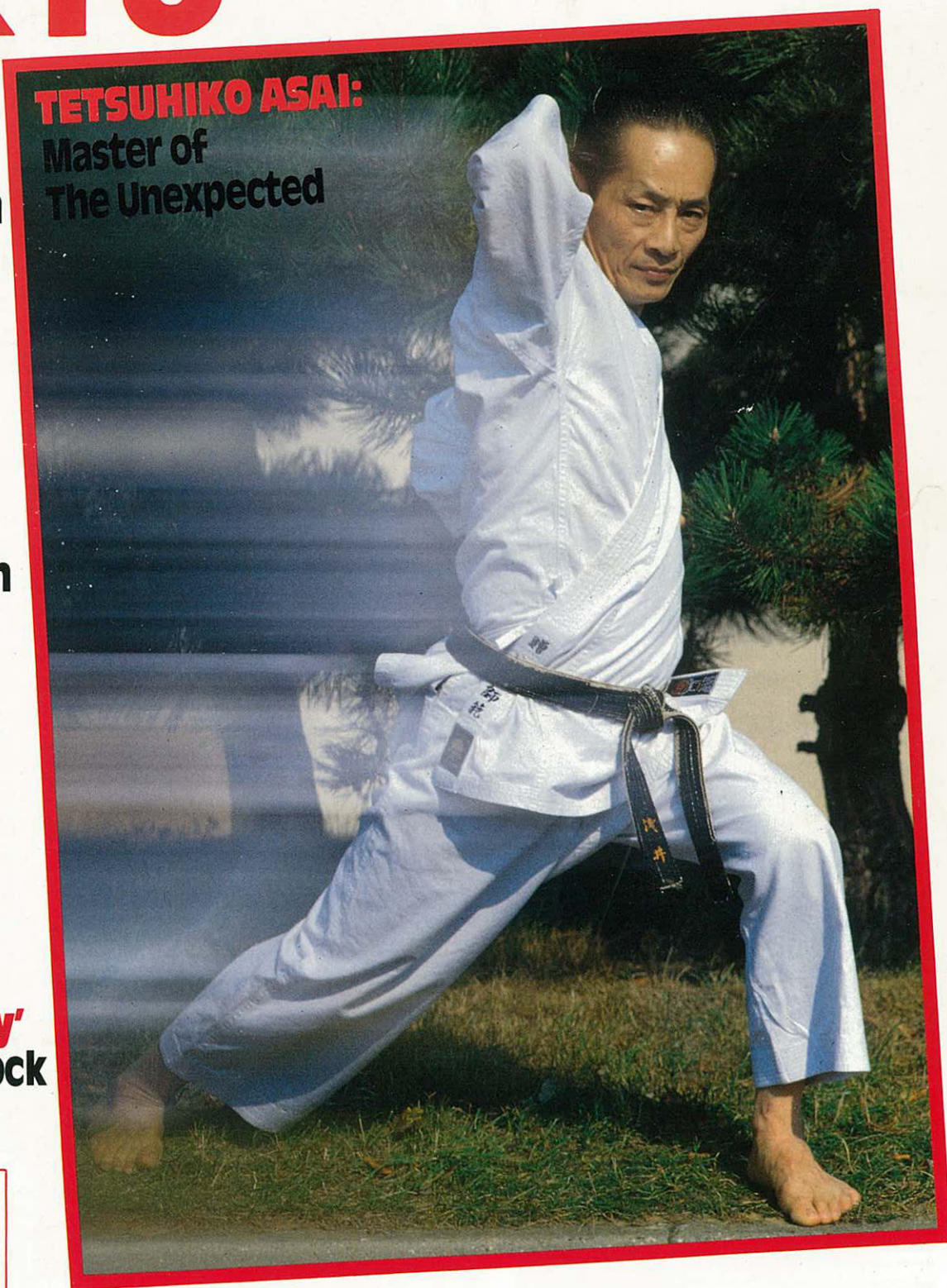
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# The 'Internal' Martial Arts of China

## Levels of Understanding in Wu Style Tai Chi Ch'uan

### A Cloud Hands Interview with Sifu Kwong Yu Wu

#### Sifu Wu. How did you get started in Tai Chi Ch'uan?

I was born into the Wu family and I am the eldest son of the fifth generation. My father, Wu Ta Kwei is the eldest son of the fourth generation, and my grandfather is the eldest son of the third generation. The eldest son is very important, so they were pretty tough on me, and whether I liked it or not, they drove me hard when I started training. They pushed me in this manner from the age of six.

The old tradition is that the grandfather teaches the grandson for a while, and then passes him on to the father. This is martial arts training. I worked with my grandfather until the age of twelve or thirteen and then went back to my father. I trained with him until I was about eighteen. All these years we lived in the club because it was convenient. In the back there was a big courtyard for practise.

You know I learned *Tai Chi Ch'uan* before I was even born. My mother used to watch my father every day, so I was being educated when I was still inside the womb. My formal training began at the age of six. In the mornings I saw Tai Chi Ch'uan, in the afternoon I saw Tai Chi Ch'uan. It was sort of 'in you' constantly. When I went to bed I saw Tai Chi Ch'uan.

#### How many hours each day would you train?

There were no fixed hours. Everyone in the family would do a 'form' at 5.30 or 6.00 in the mornings. During the classes I would help and do 'push hands' with the students. Imagine my childhood: instead of going out and playing 'cowboys and indians', I practiced the form by myself. There was no fixed time, I just had to do it. I had no choice.

#### Was there very strict discipline?

I had to do it even though I hated it.

#### When did you come to appreciate it?

When I was thirteen or fourteen I thought that I could take on my Grandfather. He was an old man of around sixty. I was mistaken. Nobody could touch my grandfather. I tried and was very quickly swept to the ground. Then I learned to appreciate it. When I was a kid they didn't let me hit people, only defensive movements, neutralize- neutralize. Once you learn to neutralize it's easy to learn the offensive.

#### Is learning how to neutralize the most important thing for someone who studies Tai Chi Ch'uan?

You're talking about a different stage now, the martial arts. When you say Tai Chi Ch'uan there are three levels or ways.

1. *Beginning - learning:* The first couple of years you learn Tai Chi Ch'uan, you're recognising just the mechanical stage, whether it is form, or pushing hands, it's mechanical. You don't know what it is or how to use it.

2. *Getting the idea:* After a couple of years you begin to 'chew' more deeply . . . then you start to 'taste' Tai Chi Ch'uan and this is when you actually begin learning things.

3. *Knowing what you are doing:* You guys with eight to ten years of experience are well on the road to discovery. So there are these different stages. The most important aspect of Tai Chi Ch'uan - I don't care what style - is that you have to know what you are doing. Unless you pay attention and analyse what you do, you won't go too far.

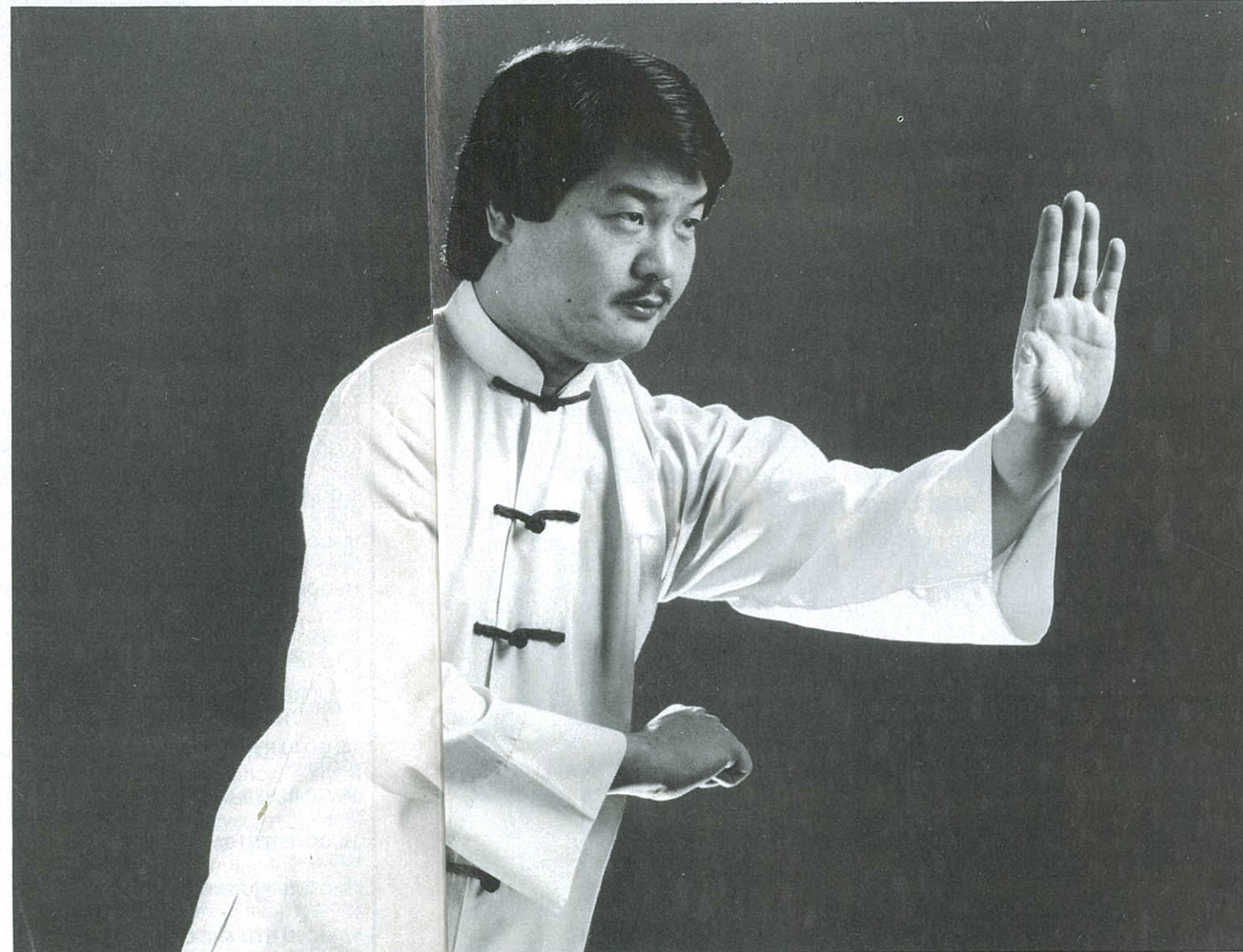
#### When you say understand what you're doing . . . what exactly does that mean? What are the elements that are involved?

I mean everything. Understanding the meaning of why you have to be relaxed. Why you do certain things in a certain way. You don't always know why, but you have to do it. Am I right? After a while, if your mind doesn't want to know why, you can still do every movement for the rest of your life - physically.

This aspect of the mind and body is focusing and breathing, the energy aspect. The energy is there, but you have to feel it and understand it. There is a lot of stretching and circulation activity involved that is very good for you; but if you don't recognise it, you won't get very far. Ask yourself the question, "Why do we do the form like this?" You may not get it then, but at least you have bothered to think about it. The form, applications, push hands: you have to know what you're doing. So study a little harder.

#### How would you evaluate Tai Chi Ch'uan as a martial art?

Martial art is not the ultimate level. It's a senior level, different from the health level. Martial is a small portion of Tai Chi Ch'uan. We are dealing in inner energy. This inner energy will redirect your



Sifu Kwong Yu Wu is a prominent teacher of the Internal arts in Canada.

martial aspect too.

#### What about the people who say that Tai Chi Ch'uan is not a martial art? There are two kinds of people, the martial artists who don't know and also the Tai Chi Ch'uan people who think that Tai Chi Ch'uan is not important to the martial society.

The people who say that Tai Chi Ch'uan is not a martial art are people who are not informed of this aspect. So, if a questioner is not taught that, it means that his *Sifu* (teacher) has not been properly taught. Anybody who comes to this school, and is taught by me, or by students training here - I don't care if

they are interested or not in martial arts - they will see it as part of our training. Some of the stuff you guys have been training has never been seen in North America before. When you know it, it's not worth a penny; when you don't know it, "Wow, it's a mystery. It can't be done that way".

You can't get the martial arts aspect before you are healthy and fit. First, you have to achieve a good level of health,

student to send people flying left, right and centre before he realises the principles involved. You can take a middle-aged student, who doesn't necessarily want to flip anybody, and by training with pushing hands and some offset, he or she can train the body, then add some applications to train their timing, co-ordination and positioning - which are very important aspects of practical martial use. You don't have to



person. Whether through sickness or for any other good reason, if the reason is valid, I will accept them. Age is not a hinderance to becoming a senior student. There is so much to do with regard to health and pushing hands, which all our mature students can develop. Seniority is very important in the martial arts circle. I don't care if the student is white, black, yellow or tan. The day they joined is the day from which their seniority is accredited. Say one student is very good in martial aspect but another is very poor. If the poor student has more years of seniority, according to the date of joining the club, then he must be given the respect of an elder brother or sister by the better student who has joined later. It is a basic matter of respect and discipline, common throughout the martial arts community.

#### There has been that controversy that says a person can learn the Form of other styles at the same time. What are your views?

I teach a person at the beginning levels in this club to the best of my knowledge. I teach the standard form to that person as closely as I can. If people want to do their own thing I ask them to go out of the door and do their own style. There is no controversy, that is the rule, Period. If a person doesn't want accuracy, they should buy a book for five dollars and create their own style. Why would such a person want to come to this school?

#### So you say that if one studies a particular style or form, one should learn that form. If you study Wu Style; learn Wu Style; or if you study Yang Style, learn Yang style?

Yes! If you want to mix the forms, do it at home, not in our classes. I am not talking about disciples here. I am talking about regular members. They can learn a basic form in a very short time, mix it with another style, and put it out on the market as a standard. I don't say they do it purposely. It's because they have forgotten their original form and have mixed and invented. But the result is a poor product, not authentic. There are many people who want to teach but it is a question of whether they know about what they are teaching. Am I right?

and then, through the proper channels, the martial training. Eventually this is combined with the inner energy, and they grow together, understand?

#### Can you advance in Tai Chi Ch'uan without learning the martial side of it?

Let me explain. Provided you don't even do pushing hands, but do the 108 movements of the Tai Chi Ch'uan Form, meditation, some 24 forms and breathing, each aspect is only limited to health. Reflex and sensitivity are lost and you will have no connection between the form and practical application. When you say martial, it is not necessary for a

see blood or broken bones before you can say that this is the martial aspect.

For example Yveline Baranyi - one of our older students. She is about 65 years old. A real tough 'cookie', retired now. You don't expect her to flip anyone but she knows quite a bit of the martial aspect now. Compared with her own age group, she is a super lady. Of course you can't compare her with an eighteen year old student. You must compare with the relevant age group.

#### Is it possible to become a senior member of the club without studying the martial aspects?

It depends on the situation of the

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## You want to teach correctly, perfectly?

Exactly. You'd be crazy not to want to. People don't teach imperfectly because they "forgot". No it is because they never knew. If I know, and I know very well, won't I show off to the best of my knowledge? Why would I want to teach someone in a 'Mickey Mouse' way? To make a monkey out of them? If you are a disciple and you want to do your own form, think of it! This is a disgrace and I will be very disappointed after the years we've spent working together to perfect our standard. If you are a senior member, and you want to mix styles, do it at home! If it's a beginner who wants to do it his own way, I don't want to waste my time with him if that is his, or her attitude.

## How much training should a senior student be doing to improve and get better at this art?

Never mind a senior, this is for everyone. Ideally, you won't be able to do as much as you should. The first priority is your family. Am I right? (*Agreement from Cloud Hands Interviewers*). I don't care what family you talk about, it is your family. The second priority is to work and make a living: your career. Then you make Tai Chi Ch'uan your third priority, instead of squash, tennis or whatever! I am very reasonable. It is not like the old days. Then, it had to be number one. You did everything for your Sifu for the rest of your life or until your Sifu said "That's good enough, go on with the rest of your life. Go and do something else".

To answer your question, we had a member who was so fascinated by Tai Chi Ch'uan that he quit his job and did Tai Chi everyday. Eight hours! I warned him not to do that or he would be sick of it one

day. Its not normal. But he continued and sure enough he got sick of it. He then got into financial problems and after a few years he quit, full up to here with Tai Chi Ch'uan. After a few years, he came back smarter. Now he does his practice every day, a little, and when he's had enough he just walks away. Period. I am not saying that you should do it just once every three months. Nothing is too much unless you know what your limits are.

## Should we be training a couple of hours a day?

Are you saying train a couple of hours a day? You'll be my Sifu. You have to work, and take care of your family. If you want to train two hours a day, do it. Maybe for two or three days a week two hours is fine, but every day? I don't think so. Maybe one person in a hundred does that.

When I was a kid I would go to school, come home and then train; no playtime. I taught beginners at the age of eight and I ran my own class at the age of twelve – teaching guy's of my father's age.

## You have a very specific way of teaching the form, to the point that

## you have a verbal description of each form. Is this something you learned from your father or grandfather?

Well, everything I learned, I learned from them. But when I teach you guys I want you to understand the logic. Everything that I have taught you, I have also gone through those stages. I have been there and I know how hard it is to learn, so I know what the problem is. I emphasize the problem in such a way as to make it easier to learn. It is a matter of putting yourself in the place of the student. There are a lot of teaching methods, but if you know that when you come across a problem you've been there yourself, then it's easier to correct. That is the difference.

## One final question, Sifu, . . . how do you see the future for Wu's Style Tai Chi Ch'uan?

I don't know about the future, but I will tell you one thing. I came here fourteen years ago. I did a lot of work, a lot of demonstrations. I would hope that people would know Wu's Style Tai Chi Ch'uan – know the **difference** and the **purpose**. Then I will have done my job – to promote Wu's Style Tai Chi Ch'uan.

## Interview conducted by – Jonathan Krehm, Martin Kennedy, Rob Dixon and Dave Robert

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