

TOKYO AMERICAN CLUB

INTOUCH

June 2004

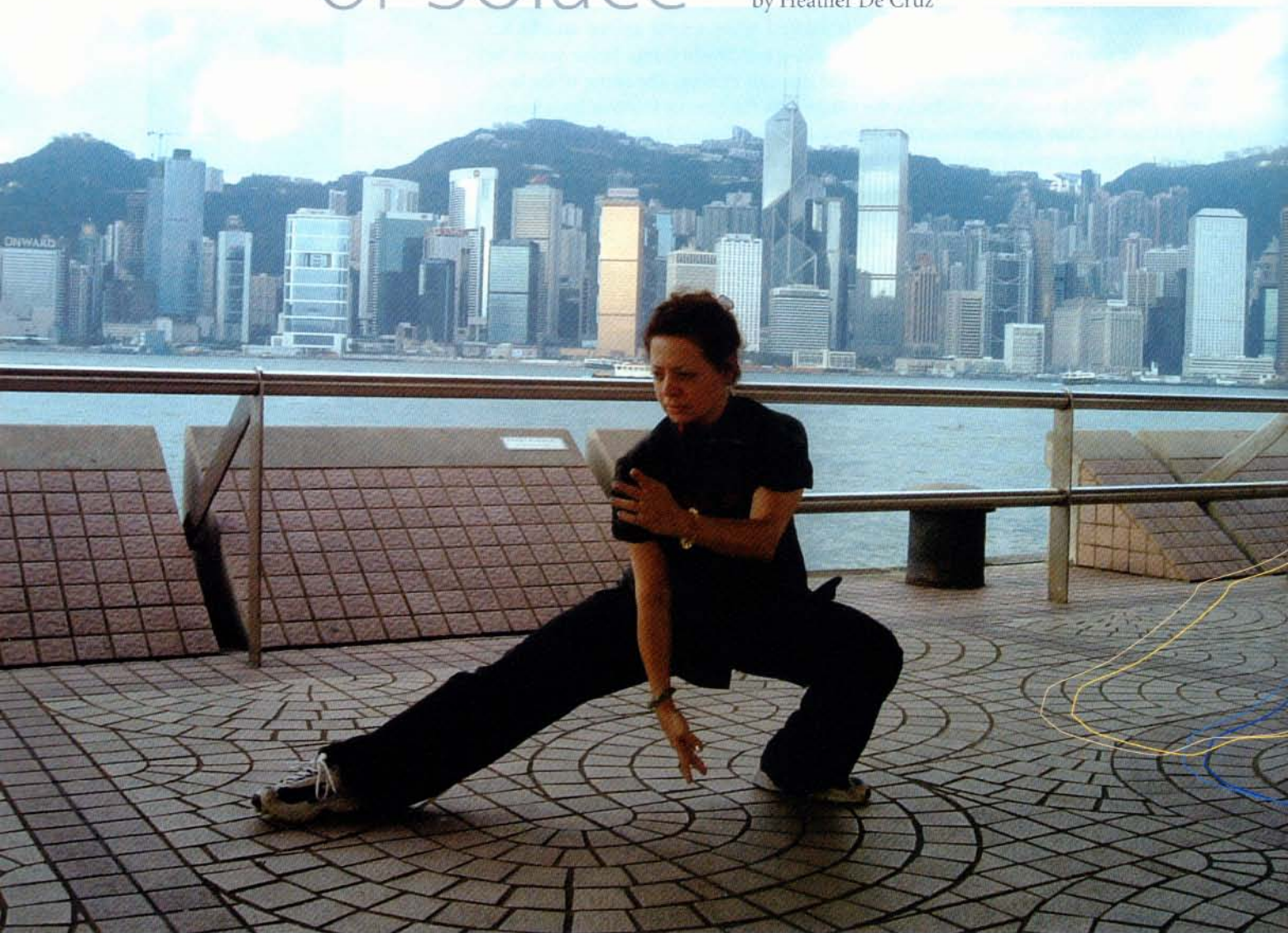


PLAYING AWAY

A Major Sell
Messenger Madness
Finding Your Chi

In Search of Solace

by Heather De Cruz



Instructor Barbara Ferretti Matsuura

If you've ever been to China you most probably would have seen gaggles of people up before dawn standing in parks waving their arms and legs about like a Bruce Lee film in slow-motion. So, what's it all about?

Tai chi chuan has many meanings and is perhaps best understood as a “fist of philosophy” in its original Chinese character form. As a newbie to tai chi, I am not really sure what this means, but am curious to find out. At this early stage, I can best describe my personal experience of tai chi in terms of some form of “energy.” My husband and I decided last year to do a hobby together, something new, perhaps symbolic of our time here. At work, a young Japanese coworker spoke about her experience of tai chi at a basement studio in Shibuya. She had joined for health reasons. We decided to give it a try.

We will never forget that basement in Shibuya. We had never seen so many people in one place to do a sport (or in this case, a martial art), all without air-conditioning, plus a language barrier that was firmly in place. Just like the travel etiquette of the subway system, the Japanese managed en masse to perform the movements without any fuss and with grace. Our story was a different one—never again!

On the hunt for another hobby, we noticed that the Club was offering a wider range of recreation activities and tai chi was amongst them. Having convinced my husband that this time it would be different, we signed up. Our experience of tai chi over the past six months has been life-changing and this is due in no small part to our sensei Barbara Ferretti Matsuura, a licensed instructor with the Japan Health Tai Chi Chuan Association.

So what has changed? As a psychology student I am particularly interested in what makes us mentally tick. The mind is represented as the ubiquitous “black box” and is, in many theories and models, considered to be the driver of human behavior. This is not the case in tai chi. In fact, the meditation elements essentially switch off the “black box” and tunes in to our energy source, so that we can experience our own tai chi.

Of course skeptics abound. After all, why should we believe in something we cannot see? Consider for a moment the air around us. Our thoughts. Our beliefs. Motives. Many facets shape our very being, both tangible and intangible. Tai chi is an art form that facilitates an awareness of what exists outside and inside of us. Performing the movements makes us aware of this and after some practice the movements come freely, without any conscious thought.

The benefits have been primarily at a level of heightened relaxation and a

feeling of inner peace. This is a natural part of the tai chi philosophy as the only thing of any importance is the here and now and not the emotional baggage we carry around with us in the “black box.”

The psychology of tai chi is rooted in each person’s experience and is mediated by the skills of the instructor. Our instructor inspires us in two ways. First, by teaching us the movements in part and as a whole. This means that we see the “big picture” every week. This was not the case at the Shibuya basement, as the parts have to be mastered first. Second of all, our teacher educates us. The concepts are based upon imagery in Chinese character form and each week a particular posture or movement is championed. This is shown and explained to us so that we are able to understand the historical origins of this Chinese martial art. For instance, my favorite part of the “moving meditation” is the number three pose, “White Crane Spreads Its Wings.” This creates a meaningful image to remember. The beauty and grace of tai chi masks the real intention of this “soft” type of self-defense, which uses skilled movements to knock potential opponents off-balance. This is not in the foreground of our class, however, as we are taught tai chi chuan to balance our health. At a practical everyday level, this “fist of philosophy” can be used to avoid the daily hassles that threaten to knock us off our feet.

In stark contrast to the Shibuya basement, we are privileged to have the opportunity to practice outdoors too, in Yoyogi Park once a month with our instructor. This is a free event so you can contact Matsuura at 03-3374-6925 for more details. Meanwhile, classes at Recreation are every Thursday, 7–8:30 p.m. The hunt is over for us, how about you? □