

Unifying Your Mind, Body, and Spirit

Local studio teaches the art of living well through the study of Kung Fu

By Keeley Kristin

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Martial arts master and teacher, Lou Illar. (Photo Credits : Collin Richie)

We all do various things to keep ourselves in what we believe to be good states of health. Some of us engage in meditation or massage. Some of us have specific eating patterns we follow, like choosing to avoid carbs, meat, or anything green. There are even those of us who take a more drastic approach and actually exert above-average levels of energy through rigorous exercise.

Diet and exercise are great, but in order to achieve overall wellness I believe there is a path that involves looking deeper into ourselves. This belief was validated when I met with teacher, humanitarian, martial artist, and owner of White Crane Studio Lou Illar to discuss the art of living well through the study of Kung Fu.

It's not about fighting; it's about living

A common misconception about Kung Fu is that it is a martial arts form used to teach people how to fight – and that actually couldn't be any farther from the truth.

“Kung Fu is referred to in a way that we perceive violence and anger and revenge and combat, but rather it's a way of self-discovery,” said Illar. “It points you in the direction that you need to go in order to exist in these times when we are exploited and have lost control of our lives.”

The term kung fu is inter-related with Tai Chi: Where Kung Fu involves the actions of the body, Tai Chi works on one's state of mind; thus, the terms speak largely about the unique duality of art and thought. Kung Fu is the method of achieving Tai Chi – or perfect balance, perfect movement, perfect way – and is predominantly a realization of how to relax your body and your state of mind.

To break this down, the terms address an external artistic frame comprised of structures that touch on architectural balance, laws of physics and kinetics, and poses and positions of dance. They also approach a specific inherent aspect of human conflict that both civilizes and relaxes our emotions, as well as our physical and intellectual worldview.

Together these artistic frames present an insight into tweaking the human anatomy by relaxing the nervous system and strengthening breathing, muscle function, organ function, and brain function. Kung Fu therefore becomes not about caging one in combat but about freeing him or her from the distraction of emotions that create internal conflicts, which not only produce undue stress but also elicit unnecessary violent responses to others.

From opposition and conflict come harmony and control

History dictates that one of the greatest contributions to Kung Fu comes from the Taoist philosophy, which teaches that there is one truth, undivided, at the root of all things; this contribution is found in the writings of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching (The Parting of the Way, translated).

Picture the Yin-Yang symbol: The circle represents Tao (“the way” out of which all existence arises), and the halves within represent Yin (dark) and Yang (light). The idea is that the feminine Yin and masculine Yang energies interplay and thus give birth to the manifest world (the five elements – earth, wind, air, water, and fire). Yin and Yang become mutually arising, continuously transforming; one cannot exist without the other. The duality of all phenomena (summer and winter, male and female, life and death) are therefore opposing manifestations of the same principle and are not viewed as independent phenomena.

So what does this have to do with Kung Fu? Everything.

“[What Lao Tzu told us is that] out of the void comes one and from one comes two (opposition); two begets three and from three come all things,” explained Illar. “We create these oppositions in different ways. Kung Fu, for example, uses force and lightness. The lightness becomes the way to practice...And so what the Tao lent Kung Fu is the ability to adapt to all ages. It becomes this terrific conflict, and world of conflict, that we create around ourselves.”

In essence, Kung Fu is about recognizing our own internal conflict and learning how to control our accompanying emotions.

“Each day I wake up, I am a different person,” said Illar. “We as a society don’t know ourselves in that manner, so we don’t think of ourselves that way. Instead, we focus on the many things we are afraid of – fear of being late, fear of losing, fear of not being good enough. Those fears, in turn, envelop everything we do [and, in the end,] are they worth the way they make us feel?”

If the ideal state of things is harmony, then logically it makes sense that a balance between Yin and Yang in body and mind is necessary to achieve control and harmonization.

Fighting without fighting

Kung Fu gives us a way to create useful, functional energy out of all things existing in opposition by offering a specific method to avoid conflict physically, mentally, and emotionally – only you learn that it’s not really about avoiding conflict at all.

“It’s more about making ourselves better [as human beings] so that we are above the conflict,” explained Illar. “WuShu, which is a methodical approach to controlled energy, teaches you to lead people in a direction that is functional for them, and for us.”

And therein lies the studio’s principle of fighting without fighting. When you practice Kung Fu, you learn that a punch isn’t a punch and a kick isn’t a kick: They are states of existence. It’s a transformation from action to existence. You learn to measure your emotional response to conflict by placing your intelligence over your strength. You don’t want to exert yourself in the wrong way, as doing so will result in a harmonious imbalance. Illar explains:

“Conflict is always with us. The best way of dealing with conflict is to accept the fact that the ability to avoid it is always with us. Once we realize that we are the source of our own conflict [because we are in a state of conflict with ourselves], we learn that the emotions bothering us on a daily basis are what we must confront.”

So what is the best way of doing this? It depends on a myriad of factors: timing, place, emotions, and everything else that creates you and your ability to adapt. Kung Fu allows us a way to adapt functionally by controlling our emotions and keeping them from dominating us.

“You must discover that there is value in yourself – doing something you never thought you could do,” Illar said. “Realizing this, and knowing this, is the beginning of understanding Kung Fu...and, ultimately, of understanding yourself.”

White Crane Kung Fu

Master Illar's teaching methods are geared towards developing controls over impulsive behavior, as well as understanding that those behaviors cause emotions that determine one's success or failure in resolving conflict rather than controlling it. His students learn to be patient, clear-minded, and focused while counterbalancing stressful emotions.

Breathing is Key

The study of Kung Fu is about aligning your breathing – aligning the state of your heart and lungs with your spine and pelvis. In doing this, you bring your mind and body into a functional state where both can perform better. Ultimately, you unify your muscles with the breath in your body. This creates a state of existence with what is happening in your body: a unification of your mind, your body, and your spirit.

For more information about White Crane Studio, Lou Illar, and the benefits of Kung Fu, go to www.WhiteCraneStudio.com.