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INSTITUTE OF MARTIAL ARTS

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FITNESS

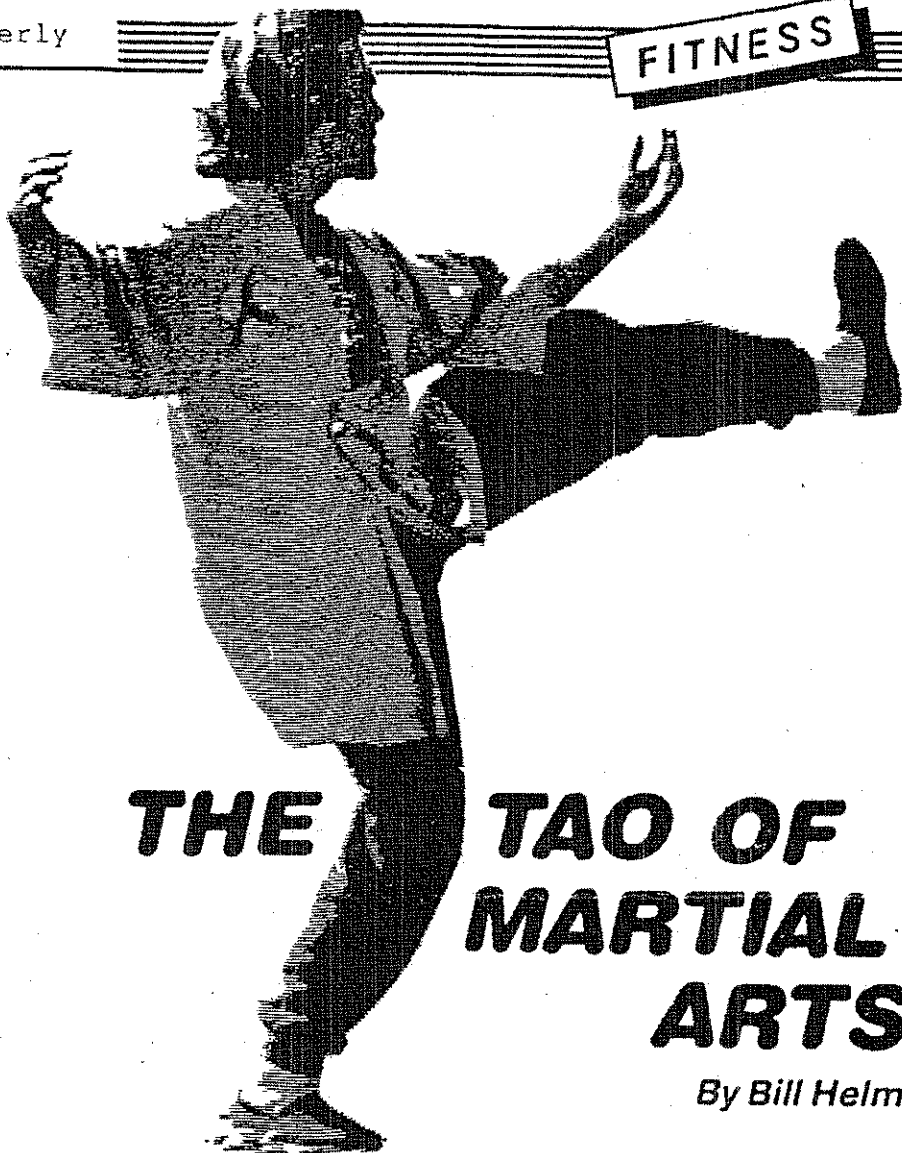
The martial arts are timeless and proven methods of self-empowerment. In their purest form they address the totality of the human process: integrating physical, cognitive and spiritual aspects of the individual. By providing a structured environment in which to experience aggression, they not only teach us to accept and deal with the anger and violence around us, but allow us to come to terms with those feelings in ourselves.

The martial arts have been imported by the west primarily as a means of physical exercise and self defense, often at the expense of their other important attributes. The integration of body and mind, the end result of diligent practice, eventually leads to more profound self-understanding. This forms the basis of spiritual realization, wherein the student experiences true internal harmony and unity of the self with all life. When the body and spirit act together the warrior in life, like the warrior in battle, becomes one with his (or her) opponent, accepting force and then neutralizing and redirecting it in a spontaneous, powerful and peaceful manner.

Historically the warrior-priests of Vedic India, imperial China and feudal Japan were preservers of spiritual truths that form the foundation of martial arts philosophy. The teachings of Yogic, Taoist and Zen Buddhist traditions all stress that spiritual enlightenment — the highest level of martial skill — depends upon giving up one's fear of death (and attachment to life), in order to realize true freedom. As the Yaqui sorcerer-warrior Don Juan says, "A warrior thinks of his death when he becomes confused." It is clear that the martial arts teach more than kicks, blocks and punches. They teach us the discipline of living totally in the moment, without regard for death's constant presence. With our relationship to our own mortality in its proper perspective, we can experience life fully and without the burden of fear.

In contrast to the oriental super-hero mythology that has been popularized in the west the ultimate goal of martial excellence, according to the Taoist sage Sun Tzu, is to win without fighting. With the clarity of mind that comes with spiritual growth combined with physical prowess, the warrior can defeat an opponent's strategy before violence occurs. Paradoxically, the art of war, as it has been handed down through the ages, is most essentially an art of peace.

Today the martial arts continue to offer us methods of self-empowerment. While there are a multiplicity of styles, generally divided into "hard" and "soft" forms, all the martial arts are ultimately directed



THE TAO OF MARTIAL ARTS

By Bill Helm

toward the same goal — the attainment of a graceful, powerful posture in life.

The "hard" styles like Kung-Fu (Chinese) and Karate (Japanese) utilize linear movements, closed-hand punches and kicks. The Dojo (classroom) is designed to simulate battle conditions, where free-sparring and self defense exercises train the body/mind to respond appropriately when threatened. By controlling aggression the student learns to master all violent impulses in himself and in others. Studiously repeated techniques will enhance awareness and increase self-confidence, even though students will rarely meet more formidable opponents on the street than those he finds among his fellow students.

The "soft" styles — Tai Chi Chuan, Pakua and Aikido — emphasize the development of the mind through the mastery of subtle internal energies, slow movements and meditation. Their motion is more circular, encouraging a less violent response toward the opponent, al-

though they can be as powerful in self defense as any "hard" style.

The differences among the various martial arts are basically differences in characteristics, attitudes, environment and level of difficulty. All of them however will develop muscle strength, coordination and grace. The diaphragmatic breathing that is practiced — where each breath originates in the Tai-tien center just below the navel — harmonizes the internal Chi energy and dissipates tension. Strict mental concentration keeps students from succumbing to temporary pain and soreness, and pushes them beyond self-imposed limitations.

No matter what martial arts method we choose, perseverance and discipline are essential if a student is to succeed in the arduous work of perfecting the physical, mental and spiritual faculties on a regular basis, year after year. But in the end it is neither the technique nor the school that can give us power; it is ultimately we who empower ourselves.