

TOKYO LETTER

In the Balance

Recently in the West there seems to be a growing interest in Eastern culture and philosophy. Books on various aspects of the East can be seen everywhere. Part of this new wave of interest might well be casual or superficial, but some part must be an expression of a deep-rooted restlessness and dissatisfaction, a looking for "something else," and a sincere search for a "taste" which is felt to be missing in the modern West.

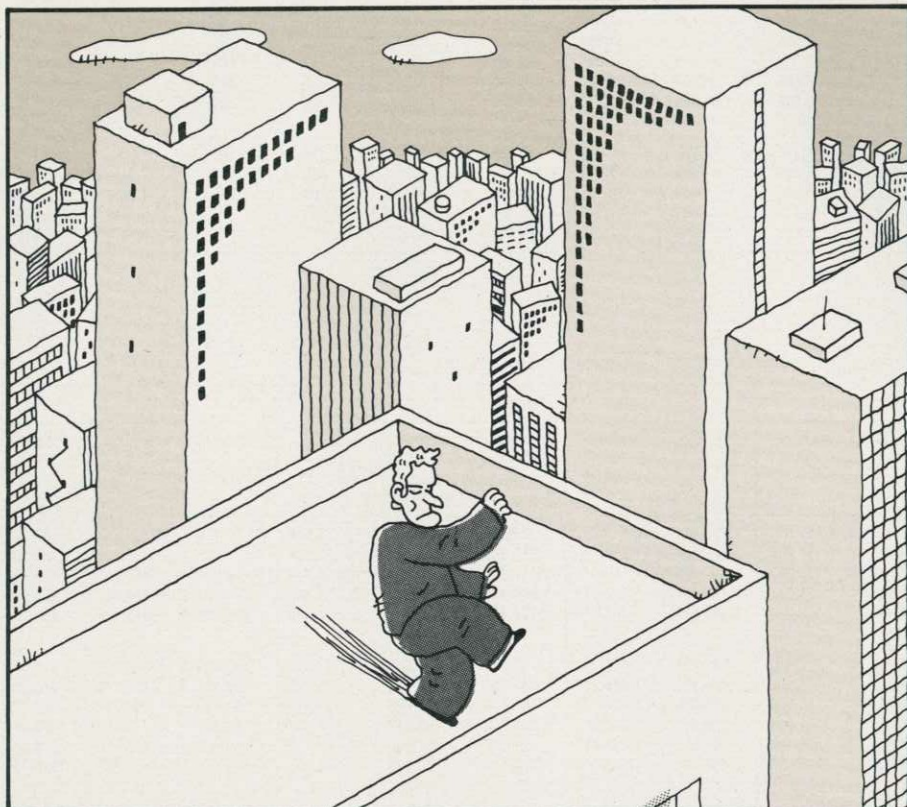
Yet upon arriving in Tokyo, one might begin to wonder if this famous "East" is not a dream. Tokyo is most surely a modern city and a huge one. Neon lights and crowded trains, the constant noise and the fast pace—these are everyone's first impressions. It is hard to believe that most of this modernization has taken place over the past generation. Most people who can remember would probably say that they live better now than in the past.

A number of my acquaintances, both foreign and Japanese, are students of traditional fine arts, performing and martial arts, or of Zen Buddhism, and all seem to feel that in general modern Japanese people are no longer very interested in the traditions of this country, preferring foreign forms. Children in school are routinely taught the basics of European and not Japanese music, and musical instrument shops are stocked with electric guitars and organs. Baseball, golf and tennis seem to be favorite sports. Western style clothing is worn, and Western style food can be found everywhere. Even fast food is becoming more and more popular because of its convenience.

Still, there do exist here traditions of study which have, to my knowledge, no counterparts in the West.

My area of interest is health, and I came to Japan a little over a year ago with the intention of pursuing studies in this field. I am learning Tai Chi Ch'uan, which is an old Chinese martial art and exercise for health, and Seitai, which is a fairly new Japanese health method including a form of therapeutic exercise as well as treatment by fine manipulation.

The movement of Tai Chi Ch'uan is



soft, round, slow, flowing, and silent. "Tai Chi" has the meaning of infinite, limitless. "Chuan" means fist. The well known Yin-yang symbol showing the balance of opposites such as day and night, full and empty, light and heavy, soft and hard, also represents "Tai Chi." An example of how this applies to the principles of Tai Chi Ch'uan movement is that although the movements are round, the spine is an axis and must be straight. Again, though the movement is soft and gentle, the mind is concentrated and firm. In my school, Tai Chi Ch'uan is also called "moving meditation."

Tai Chi Ch'uan's special point is that it does not require strength and does not seek to develop strength (muscle power). By moving slowly, quietly and without strain, the body is relaxed, breathing can deepen and the mind become peaceful. Stiffness, tension, shallow and uneven breathing, distorted posture and an agitated state of mind are basic indications of many physical and mental troubles. If a person practices Tai Chi Ch'uan for some time, all these will begin to change.

In Seitai there is a kind of treatment

that looks like what would be called "laying on of hands." In the West perhaps this expression is associated with an inborn gift or talent, or with some kind of mystical power, but in Seitai we make use of the sensitivity of the hand, and work to educate and expand the hand's natural "intelligence." Practice sessions concentrate on developing the skill of "listening through the hands" to the condition of the partner's body.

In a sense we are working with the invisible, something unseen but present. Life itself cannot be seen, though we can see if something "has life" in it or not. When touching another person's body, even someone who is inexperienced can detect a response, a sort of movement or current inside. To develop this crude sense into something more subtle requires training, as does any skill. When learning to read a child begins with the letters, but it is only a matter of time before he can make sense out of what he could not decipher before, and even read "without thinking." What appears at first mysterious and impossible can gradually become second nature. In the same way, in Seitai, "reading the

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body" is learnt.

In both Tai Chi Ch'uan and Seitai one often hears the word "ki". This is an important word in Oriental medicine, martial arts and other fields, and is generally translated as energy, though I do not think that an exact translation exists in English. In any case, something finer than physical force is intended—perhaps "life energy" would be more appropriate. In Japanese the word "ki" forms part of the expressions "to pay attention" and "to take care." The word for "air" and the word for "weather" contain "ki" as well. In English there exist such vague words as "atmosphere" and "temperament," and there are old words such as "humor" and "ether" which convey something of the same feeling. All of these words have to do with emotions or with "something in the air," something sensed but not seen. So the idea of "ki" really should not be entirely strange to Westerners, even though it has not been particularly studied or developed in Western culture.

Breathing is also important. No breath, no life. In Tai Chi Ch'uan it is said that the breath is what connects the body and the mind (consciousness). In Seitai, it is said that we cannot look at body and mind separately, and in every case we work in coordination with the rhythm of the breath. This creates a special kind of communication.

Although explanation and theory do exist and are of value and interest, finally

the heart of the matter is in practice and experience. In this context I have been told that, "We can only reach the spirit through (practice of) form. Otherwise we are just talking."

In Japan both Eastern and Western approaches to health are well developed, while in the West generally orthodox medicine prevails. Regarding which is "better" there are various opinions, though essentially they differ so much in principle and intention that I think they need not interfere or compete with each other. On the contrary, a situation where a number of approaches are available provides people with the freedom and responsibility of choice. I think this is beginning to be appreciated by many people in the West who have experienced frustration with a one-sided approach.

A foreign friend was recently impressed by the agility of Japanese old people, remarking that even for young Westerners it is difficult to sit *seiza* (Japanese style) for any period of time. The case is the same with the Japanese toilet, many Westerners finding a squatting position difficult because of stiffness. Actually these are two good cultural habits which keep the legs and spine young and flexible, and it really requires no effort to learn them in childhood while the body is still soft. The practice of sleeping on the floor on a firm mat (*futon*) is also good for the back, and the custom of leaving shoes off while inside the house allows the feet

freedom of movement, encouraging good circulation.

Looking at the other side, members of this generation of Japanese are decidedly taller and heavier than their parents. Here can be seen the influence of diet. But it is already common knowledge that a rich diet is a cause of many chronic diseases, and health can be damaged as much or more by over abundance as by lack. If health depends so much on the daily use of the body, as I believe it does, then as Japanese people increasingly follow a Western way of life, they must expect to encounter the same health problems as Westerners. Maybe it is impossible, and in some cases even undesirable, for things to remain "as they were," but I truly hope that in the rush to become modern, those "leftover" customs which are beneficial for health don't disappear.

Personally I grew up in very modern and comfortable surroundings, but I came to feel that without physical and mental health the meaning of "living well" is lost. It will be a shame if the Japanese people throw away good and wholesome parts of their culture, because once a tradition is broken it is never easy to find the thread again. Though inevitably times will change, this age provides wonderful possibilities for members of different cultures to meet and learn from each other, and for individuals of East and West to help each other become more complete.

(Miriam Maisel)

BOOK REVIEW

By Tatsuya Komatsu
Senior Managing Director
Simul International, Inc.

Nippon: The Land and Its People

Gakuseisha Publishing Co., Ltd.;
352 pages; ¥1,200

This book was first compiled by Nippon Steel Corp. in 1978 as an educational tool for its employees. *Nippon: The Land and Its People* has been sought after ever since by many outside the company and treasured by the few who had the



good fortune to obtain it. Its publication for the general market is very much welcome, and it is no surprise that bookstores are finding it hard to keep this little volume in stock.

Although interest in Japan has boomed as the country has grown into the free world's second largest industrial power, knowledge about the Japanese and their society is surprisingly scant and often distorted. The country's geographical isolation and relatively recent development as a modern industrial democracy take some of the blame, but another major cause has been the Japanese people's own failure to explain themselves to their friends overseas.

Yasuo Aoto, who conceived of this book and was one of its principal authors,