

DRAGON MAGAZINE No.12, p.60: "SUN DO: MOUNTAIN ALCHEMY"

INTERVIEW WITH GRAND-MASTER HYUNMOON KIM
(ACCOMPANIED BY NICOLAS TACCHI)

What is this so-called "Mountain" Sun Do practice? Taoist yoga? Korean Qi Gong? To answer this question, curious practitioners of Tae Kwon Do, hapkido, karate, aikido and yoga, always ready for new experiences, met up at Nancy along with a few neophytes for a workshop organized by Master Nicolas Tacchi and the TKD and Korean Martial Arts' commission of the FFST.

Present were Grand-Master (Bup Sa Nim) Hyunmoon Kim, head of the school, who came specially from the USA, and Philippe Lewkowicz (Sa Bum Nim), official representative for France.

On the program: stretching exercises, breathing and meditation, traditional Korean salutations, and even a meeting where anyone could ask anything they wished.

During the three-day event, seventy people benefited from the teaching of the Master. And ... DRAGON was there to reveal to its readers, for the first time in France, the principles of this art.

INTRODUCTION

This is in fact a very effective method of accumulating energy (called Ki by the Koreans, Chi by the Chinese) by means of exercises, breathing techniques, postures, and meditation. The accumulated energy is used to establish balance on the physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. Everyone can practise Sun Do, regardless of their physical condition to begin with. In the course of the practice, students gradually build a repertoire of progressively more difficult and complex exercises. Based on the same principles as the meridians in acupuncture, Sun Do is a method of personal development founded on body/mind harmony. The effects of the practice are relaxation and inner calm, followed by a strengthening of the immune system. Then, after assiduous practice, the student begins a process of deep meditation which leads to wisdom and inner development.

DRAGON MAGAZINE: *Master, would you introduce yourself?*

GRANDMASTER HYUNMOON KIM: Although I live in the USA with my family, I am originally from Korea. I began doing Sun Do 26 years ago. I am the youngest in a family of seven children; my oldest brother is 20 years older than me. As a teenager, I quit school, being what you would call a "bad boy." Physically, I was often ill; mentally, I was lazy, didn't know what to do with myself, and would just hang about. I didn't like my life, had no

motivation, no confidence in myself, and had a lot of concerns about my future.

When I was about 15 years old, I read an article in the paper, "Sun Do comes down from the mountain," quite a long article, which nevertheless held my attention for the first time. I knew intuitively that this was going to be my path. But my military service held me back for another three years, at the end of which I was able to begin practising Sun Do, effectively changing my life and changing myself.

DM: *Why did you come to France? What is your connection with our country?*

GM HMK: This is my first visit to France and to Europe, but my second brother is married to a Belgian woman, so I heard French spoken all the time around me without having a chance to learn it. Therefore, the sound of French is in my heart, and not something really foreign to me. Also, when I first arrived in the United States, someone came to me and suggested that I take part in a musical comedy, a love story set in the Pacific islands. He was looking for an Asian to play a role alongside the title role of a French farmer. I had to learn my lines phonetically and say them with a French accent. These, then, were my first two contacts with France!

But my links with your country do not stop there: I was lucky enough to meet Philippe Lewkowicz and Nicolas Tacchi. That is why I am here: to share with you my knowledge of Sun Do.

DM: *Could you briefly introduce Sun Do?*

GM HMK: Sun Do is very ancient. In France, you have very ancient ruins; you even have the famous Lascaux caves. The history of Sun Do is the history of the human race as well, for Sun Do is about breathing. Do you know that the body is 88 percent water? Water is very important for us living beings. Without water, how long could we survive? Only three days! That shows how important it is. But how long could we live without breathing? A very, very short time, really. Now you understand the crucial role of breathing. Yet we never think about it! Our ancestors, however, understood instinctively the supreme importance of the breath thousands of years ago, without the benefits of modern technology.

In fact, all civilisations realized its significance very early on. The word "spirit" comes from the Latin "spiritus," meaning, first of all, breath. In the Bible, God brought his creation to life with his breath. In the Hindu faith, there are the lesser gods, but Hindus also worship a supreme god, Brahma, who is associated with the breath. In Korea, the expression, "throat breathing" is used to measure life: if a person's breath rises higher than the throat, he will die. That is why it is important to bring the breathing down.

DM: *Who founded Sun Do?*

GM HMK: In the beginning, in Korea, Sun Do was practised by hermits in the mountains. There was no real founder. It is a collective human idea, a bit like a great river with many tributaries flowing into it. Qi Gong is certainly one of these tributaries, but other currents have blended into it in the last 9,800 years. After the arrival of foreign influences and diverse philosophical currents of thought, some practitioners withdrew permanently into the Korean mountains so that they could practise quietly according to tradition, away from urban society, thus preserving the art and protecting it from extinction.

In 196970, a monk, Chung San ("Blue Mountain"), came down from the mountains and reintroduced this practice to the modern world. It was this hermit -- who was later known by another name, Be Kyung, "Secret Border" -- who trained me, and, beginning in 1979, I started teaching Sun Do in the West, specifically in the United States, where this art now has firm roots.

DM: *Are you teaching Sun Do the same way that you learned yourself?*

GM HMK: I have had to make a few changes to adapt it to modern life. The system is the same but it is explained a little differently so that Westerners can understand it. I have combined my contemporary Western studies (I have a PhD in Human Sciences) with the ancient knowledge of the East so that I can more easily transmit this 9,800 -year-old discipline. Given my background and the intensive retreats that I did in Korea with my teacher Be Kyung, I understand the life of the hermit but I also know how life is in urban society. People who live in cities are caught up in the problems of modern life and in a permanent state of stress, and they need an effective way to regulate their lives, which is what Sun Do can offer them.

To fulfil my duty to society, I would like to make Sun Do more popular while working towards better quality in order to take this discipline to a higher level in the West, but at the same time I want to maintain the wisdom of this tradition. Sun Do is dedicated to helping all the citizens of the world find a healthier way of living. The goal is to cultivate a personal sense of peace and to bring to everyone the satisfaction that comes from a life lived in harmony, respecting the differences between people and cultures and each person's role in society. I am the director of the National Federation of Kouk Sun Do. "Kouk" means "country," but also has a very positive connotation in the Korean language; for its development in the West, however, I have reduced the name to "Sun Do," which means "Ultimate Way."

DM: *I see that a lot of trainees today are practitioners of Tae Kwon Do or*

Hapkido. Have you yourself practised a martial art?

GM HMK: In Korea, Tae Kwon Do is very popular, but I have never really practised it or any other martial art. Perhaps these trainees are looking for a type of meditation that they have not found in their practice, or no doubt they are trying to find answers to certain questions: in the martial arts, the importance of the Hara (belly) centre is often mentioned, but without any explanation. When we first opened Sun Do to the public in Korea, it was mostly martial artists who were drawn to it. To demonstrate Sun Do, we used to do fire walks and break stones and so forth. But we stopped doing this kind of show, because if we had continued, people would have come only for that, would only have wanted that, and that was not our goal.

NT (NICOLAS TACCHI): A martial arts practitioner reaches a point where he or she wants to have an inclusive practice. Although some people are more interested at first in the sport, fighting, or competition aspect, there is a natural evolution through progressive technique to where one thinks of it more as an art than a sport. I also like the theory that in Asia long ago, men and women who reached old age saw themselves treated with increasing respect and accruing honours. If they could maintain good health, old age could be the happiest time of their lives. According to Taoist medicine, the fact that someone attained old age proved that they had harmonized the dual forces of yin and yang and were very close to the ultimate unity, the Tao. They had found their place between heaven and earth in the cycle of all things. Therefore, longevity was not simply a question of duration, it served as an example for everyone of how one should live. That is why old people were given so much respect. What could be a better way to demonstrate the value and benefits of one's martial practice than to continue to evolve on the tatami mats into a ripe old age?

This is why Sun Do is extremely beneficial for practitioners of the martial arts, not only for daily physical exercise -- flexibility, muscular strength, balance -- but also for lifelong evolution. A medal is a victory for a moment; to live to old age happy and in good health is proof of a successful life.

DM: Can one compare Sun Do and yoga, and what are the specifics of your practice?

GM HMK: Yoga is a Hindu practice; Sun Do is Taoist gymnastics. There are similarities, but each branch of yoga has its own vision. Sun Do is practised by following a table of postures, arranged according to a classification of belts. It's like an alphabet: the system is pedagogically precise, whereas in yoga there are as many pedagogies as there are teachers.

What is specific to Sun Do is the work on circulation of energy. Sun Do works with three chakras (centres of energy), yoga with seven. That does not mean that there are only three in Sun Do and only seven in yoga, but these

are the essential centres. In our practice, one works on the tancheon. "Tan" means red and "cheon" means field. Tancheon is therefore the red field, meaning the field of energy. We count three tancheon: the lower (below the navel), the middle (in the solar plexus), and the upper (between the eyes). But these three centres become one. In practice, Sun Do begins by reinforcing the lower tancheon (Hadan Tancheon). It is the tancheon of reality -- you don't have your "head in the clouds," you have your "feet on the ground." By working mainly on the lower tancheon, you form at the same time the two others. The Taoist master Be Kyung compares Taoist internal alchemy to a lighted candle. The essence, which emanates from the navel chakra, can be compared to the wax of the candle, and the wick represents the physical health of the body. Energy, which emanates from the third eye chakra, can be compared to the flame of the candle and represents essential energy, mental alertness, and concentration. Spirit, which emanates from the heart chakra, can be compared to the light surrounding the flame of the candle. This light incarnates part of the original universal energy that is contained within every human being. Sun Do is not like other systems which concentrate successively on each centre of energy.

How do we concentrate? By the direction of our gaze. It's like when you say to someone, "I love you," you have to look directly in their eyes and not at their feet! We narrow the eyes to aid concentration, as if the eyes combine to make a single eye -- the famous "third eye."

DM: *Is it not a little too "ethereal"?*

GM HMK: On the contrary, it has a great deal of relevance in everyday life. By focussing on the tancheon, we manage our stress levels better, which improves our daily life. Professional artists (musicians, dancers, visual artists) can benefit. Control of the breath is also important for men and women involved in sports: Tae Kwon Do, rifle shooting, etc.

NT: I notice every day the benefits to be gained from doing Sun Do: ease of movement, flexibility, relaxation, greater control of breathing and stronger breaths (very important for me, as I am a professional musician and I play the bassoon). In fact I would like to create a program specifically for musicians, singers, and artists.

GM HMK: Why do we do exercises? How do they help us in everyday life? Thinking releases a rush of blood to the head. By concentrating on the tancheon, we acquire mental as well as physical flexibility and adaptability. If I don't get on with my boss, my friends, or my family, isn't it because I am too rigid? A supple mind is able to resolve a lot of things. Whatever the source of our suffering, of any attack from the external world, we don't have to worry about it.

People are often tense in the shoulder and neck area: this is simply an energy blockage. The tension is not only muscular. In the body there is lots

of tension, but it can come from the relational level, tension between individuals. If we didn't have that, society could function much better. Some people laugh easily, others find it difficult even to smile. We have to let go of all the tensions in the body. That is why Sun Do includes a lot of exercises to make the body more supple. We have millions of cells in the body, and all these cells would be much happier if we could manage to release tension.

The characteristics of Tai Chi as active meditation can be found in Sun Do: the movement of energy, work on the organs. From the moment you wake up in the morning until you go to bed at night, make your life a continuous flow, without hindrances and abrupt breaks. Psychologically speaking, when do people expend the most energy? When they are troubled. What are the two critical situations in which we are most at risk of back injury? First, when we lift something too heavy; second, when we carry even something quite light without paying attention to our posture. In the same way, if we look at our lives, sometimes we lack commitment and sincerity even just in the way we relate to others, the way we greet them. Every New Year's Eve, people make good resolutions but do not manage to keep them. So, not just once a year, but every morning, you must try to tell yourself that all your actions throughout the day are connected, they are not separate things, that your life is a single movement from beginning to end. The more disconnections there are, the more energy you lose.

DM: What happens during a Sun Do session?

GM HMK: Sun Do practice begins with a series of preparatory exercises to warm up, stretch, and relax the body (there are 50 different exercises). After that, the practitioner performs various postures for a period of 40 minutes while using lower tancheon abdominal breathing (25 postures go with the breathing: these 25 postures are different at each belt level and are set out in tables). This work constitutes the heart of Sun Do, and is called "breathing meditation." Then there is another series of thirty stretching and twisting exercises, which circulate the energy throughout the body to improve overall health. Then two times five energy meridian exercises (right and left sides), to develop the internal organs: Ki Shin Bup. After a workout, consisting of a headstand using the tips of the fingers for support, push-ups using the fingertips, and abdominal sit-ups (these three according to the level and capacity of each individual), the practice ends with a sitting meditation for a few moments. The whole thing lasts for one and a quarter to one and a half hours.

DM: Why does Sun do give so much importance to abdominal breathing?

GM HMK: In the mother's belly, the foetus lives via the navel, through the umbilical cord. This is its connection with life. Once born, a baby continues to breathe for a while through the abdomen. Then, with time, one forgets this belly breathing. If we breathe like a baby, our mind and body

can recapture their youthfulness. So we must concentrate all day on the tancheon. Breath is life, and, at some point, a mental and spiritual “baby” will be born, like a rebirth of yourself.

How can we be reborn? Through transformation. Consider how a blacksmith makes tools, weapons, and other objects: by a process of constant hot-cold, hot-cold applications, he ends up changing the consistency of metal. In the same way, the breath will change the body. My family and friends say that I have changed a lot in 25 years, mentally and physically. This is not a miracle. I have only done my Sun Do practice daily, as if I were having my breakfast. Sun Do does not come from heaven; an angel did not come down from the sky to bring me a message. That would make a nice story, but it would not be the truth. To practise Sun Do is to pay attention to one’s breathing. Is that too much to ask of students? Surely not.

Abdominal breathing should be natural, but it no longer is. Why have we lost it? Because, as we grow, we think, and thought cuts off our breathing from the lower abdomen and our breath rises to the head. Therefore we have to relearn how to breathe. It is a technique. Without learning this technique, it is difficult to achieve the breathing, but through practice, it becomes natural. The stages of training are as follows:

First stage: Simply inhale/exhale fully and deeply (4 sec-4 sec)

Second stage: Inhale, hold the breath, exhale, hold (4 sec-4 sec-4 sec- 4 sec)

Third stage: Inhale, hold the breath, exhale (4 sec - 8 sec - 4 sec)

At first, it is contrived, but then it becomes fluid and natural. Human respiration uses three parts of the body: 1) the rib cage (which must be made supple with appropriate exercises), 2) the diaphragm (a membrane which extends downwards a little like a parachute), 3) the lower abdomen. In daily life, the idea is to have a bigger respiration cycle, to lengthen the breath, not to race the engine, not to be in overdrive. To begin with, the minimum should be once a week, then, according to how much time you have, to move to two or three times a week, then every day.

So the work of Sun Do begins with strengthening the body and revitalizing the energy, the Ki. Then, little by little, the Sun Do student seeks a higher state of consciousness, a mental as well as spiritual development.

DM: How exactly does one progress in Sun Do?

GM HMK: The Sun Do student obtains a different-coloured belt each time she or he reaches a new level of practice, up to the black belt. Progress is evaluated by the frequency and quality of practice. After getting the red belt, the practitioner can have the title of Instructor. The next levels are Senior Instructor and Teacher (Sa Bum Nim).

There are five levels of practice in Sun Do:

Jung Ki Dan Boup (white belt): 2 tables of 25 postures, to recentre oneself.

Keon Kon Dan Boup (yellow belt): 1 table of 23 postures, to feel the poles of energy.

Won Ki Dan Boup (red belt and blue belt): 2 x 15 tables of 12 postures, to work with the primordial universal energy.

Chook Ki Dan Boup (grey belt): 5 postures to nourish the primordial energy.

Jin Ki Dan Boup (black belt): to work with pure transformed energy.

In all, more than 400 postures to reach Black Belt, where there is really no Dan; however, there are different states of consciousness. When you are a Black Belt, you choose more or less what you want. It is only when you reach the top of the mountain that you have a panoramic view -- you know yourself what you need to work on. At advanced levels of Sun Do, students concentrate on the circulation of energy and internal alchemy.

DM: Can you tell us about the sitting meditation in Sun Do?

GM HMK: When I moved to the United States, it was very difficult for me to explain what Sun Do was. To the question, Is it meditation? Is it a martial art? I answered, "Sun Do is neither one nor the other, but can be both."

People had a lot of difficulty understanding, as they like things to be either black or white, and don't like them to be mixed.

None of the components of Sun Do should be removed. You have to take all of it together, love the whole thing, just like in a meal, where all the different vitamins are needed to make a nutritious, varied, and balanced menu. As far as sitting meditation goes, beginners can try to do a Zen-type meditation and look calm on the outside, but internally, they could have World War Three going on! They could be filled with doubt, anguish, and confusion. Meditation should not be artificial. Besides, sitting is very physical at first, and very mentally taxing, too. It is difficult to maintain the position. Also, our mind is always thinking of something, of all the things we have to do; but with meditation, through relaxing the mental aspect we can harmonize ourselves with our true nature, the microcosm, and experience the universe, the macrocosm. This is what we call the Tao: to be completely in harmony with Nature.

DM: How many Sun Do practitioners are there worldwide?

GM HMK: There are 200,000 practitioners in Korea; in the United States and Canada, there are a few hundred people in groups who have formed 14 schools; in France, we have just begun in Paris with my representative for France, Philippe Lewkowicz (Sa Bum Nim), and in Nancy with Phalin Yocurng and Nicolas Tacchi, who have both trained with me in the US for 15 days and are Junior Instructors. In all, there are perhaps a million practitioners in the world, but they may sometimes call their practice something else.

DM: *How do you explain such a slow development?*

GM HMK: Take the spring water in this glass. Fifteen or twenty years ago, people preferred drinking soda or pop; they found mineral water insipid and tasteless. It has taken time for people to develop a taste for this water: then they finally understood that, healthwise, it has certain advantages. Don't forget that it has been a relatively short time since the diffusion began outside the mountains of Korea.

DM: *What health benefits can Sun Do bring?*

GM HMK: It is only 30 years since Sun Do became public and open to the world, therefore we do not yet have serious statistics. Nevertheless, it seems that people who practise Sun Do apparently have better health. It's a matter of appreciation: you know the story. Once somebody drew some calligraphy for me. I thought it was really beautiful, but the artist who drew it didn't like it, and he destroyed it and started again. Jokingly, I would say that I am older than when I was an adolescent (laughter), but that if you practise Sun Do assiduously for 20 years, you will live perhaps 20 years longer! Seriously, though, with longevity the goal is not simply to have a long life, but to have above all a happy one.

NT: I would like to create a class for seniors, so that we can offer them a fantastic physical activity that's manageable and that will help them to regain a certain level of overall vitality. We must not forget that breathing is an essential element and a basic factor for a healthy body, mind, and emotional life. Everyone can work on their breathing, including seniors. At a deeper level, our breathing in every moment (the way in which we breathe) directly affects our essential energy, the Ki. When the breathing is poor, the Ki, the energy in the body, can diminish or even be totally blocked. Also, energy blockages can arise from physical injury, nutritional deficiencies, emotional trauma, a rigid psychological stance, or from stress. During the Sun Do practice, the stretching and postures are performed with a specific breathing. The objective is to open all the blockages of Ki energy and to allow this energy to circulate throughout the body.

DM: *Do hermits still exist?*

GM HMK: Yes, but they do not communicate with the outside world, they are in monasteries and can only communicate with people who are “open” (such as priests).

DM: *Some people may be afraid of getting involved in a sect or a religion....*

NT: Work on oneself, personal development, too often leads the neophyte into the arms of commercially minded and even criminal organizations. It is important to be able to recognize these sects, not only in order to fight against them and unmask their tactics, but also to distinguish the true seekers and authentic teachers. Following an inquiry, the French ministry specified six criteria defining sectarian orientation: 1) high fees, 2) sectarianism, 3) the obligation to live in a community, 4) proselytizing, 5) not respecting the law, 6) not respecting health and education. Now, none of these criteria apply to our practice: our fees are reasonable, we do not stop anybody from doing other things, our development is above all personal and harmonious with regard to respecting the differences between people and cultures. It's true that Sun Do is a Korean practice, but it is one that is perfectly suited to every individual, regardless of age, physical capacity, state of health, culture, or religion. In France, Sun Do practitioners are licensed with the FFST, the multisports federation approved by the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

GM HMK: There is a big difference between an ordinary person and a pioneer. To make a comparison with business: when something new arrives on the market, at first it seems a bit of a novelty, but it can end up being a market leader. In the political world, too, someone who may seem to have avant-garde ideas could turn out to be a first-class politician. When I arrived in the United States, many people when they met me said to themselves, “Oh, he's different!” because of my shaved head. Now this hairstyle is all the rage.... I am convinced that the benefits of Sun Do are such that all these prejudices are going to disappear. Besides, I now teach at a university, and Sun Do has become public knowledge.

DM: *Is Sun Do going to evolve?*

The tables showing the techniques are definitive. Sometimes we want to have a little taste of something extra, but it is not necessary. The format of a one-hour, 20-minute session is sufficient for a foundation class. In a retreat, it's different: we can add supplementary activities, such as a 45-minute meditation or the bear walk, the tiger walk, even a few hundred bows (deep bends)!

Nevertheless, the central idea of Taoism is non-resistance: to let things happen naturally. In Taoist practice, we learn the principle of letting things take their natural course so as to understand and open ourselves to

the truth of the natural world. Like water, when we move forward in life, we are naturally drawn to paths that we should take; we go to the places that we need to go.

(Interview conducted by Master Rémi Mollet. Article translated by Elizabeth Chalom.)