My Spiritual Journey with Tai Chi and Arica

By Margaret Olmsted, senior teacher and Legacy Holder for the Tai Chi Foundation

As we enter our 50th year as a tai chi school, I am inspired to look back at how I started my spiritual journey. In 1974, at age 23, I traveled to Cholula, Mexico, to hook up with a cute guy I met at a friend's wedding. Unfortunately, he came down with Hepatitis and was unable to hang out. So, I traveled around with others I met on the road — it was the 70s, and we were all hippies. I met another cute guy and his friends with a VW bus, and we drove around Mexico together for a while. At one point, we spent the night at a campground and, the next morning, went looking for magic mushrooms that grew out of cow patties in a wet, foggy field.

Success! We took our bagful and headed into the mountains to a place called Agua Azul, which had milky blue cascading waters. We camped out and ate the mushrooms, and within a short time, my perception of reality altered. My awareness expanded — colors were brighter, the sun felt warmer, and the air was magical. My kinesthetic sense heightened. My heart felt open. There was a feeling of almost understanding *everything*, and then it was gone. But I remember thinking: *There's something else going on, another level of awareness and understanding.*

At the same time, I was reading *Center of the Cyclone* by John Lilly in which he describes his spiritual journey. When I got back to New York City, where I lived in my brother's elegant brownstone, I finished the book. One section was about John Lilly's experience in Chile with Oscar Ichazo, who founded the Arica Institute in 1972. I was determined to find something like he described: a community of people meditating together for the purpose of the transcendence of the ordinary. Remarkably, I opened an issue of the Village Voice, and there was a quarter-page ad for Arica announcing an introductory Open House program. I was amazed and delighted!

I went to several of Arica's Open Houses and one-day programs and decided the work was for me. I liked the community of open-hearted teachers with a sparkle in their eyes. I liked the meditations and mantra and philosophy of becoming enlightened and serving humanity. I felt it was helping me discover another level of awareness. It was unlike anything I had encountered before.

Two months later, I moved to Miami, returning to school to become a marine biologist. I contacted the Arica community there and told them I wanted to do their 40-Day Training program. I did an extended version of it while attending classes and studying over the fall. There were six of us in the program, and three of us are still actively doing the Arica work. Two even became tai chi apprentices for a while. The Arica training helped me to see myself differently. I felt less constrained by my ego and the rules of society, less "asleep," and more aware of my higher self.

Needless to say, I never became a marine biologist; I was hooked on the spiritual path. I went to Gainesville, Florida to visit friends and met Patrick Watson, who was visiting from New York and teaching a tai chi weekend. He was big and jovial and had a twinkle in his eye, too. I had seen tai chi twice before and loved the slow, relaxed movement. I remember a friend saying she needed to do it in an air-conditioned room. I was intrigued by the idea that moving slowly could make you warm. What was going on? Attracted to tai chi, and because I had no direction in life other than to become more awake, in December of 1975, I moved back to Manhattan to do more Arica work with Oscar and study tai chi with Patrick.

It turned out that Patrick was also doing the Arica work and, in 1974, had the honor of arranging a meeting in New York between his teacher, Professor Cheng Man Ching, and Oscar. Patrick understood how the teachings of these two masters envisioned the same goal, running along parallel tracks toward it—one calling that goal "Enlightenment" and the other "Becoming one with the Dao." The two masters recognized each other as such, and Patrick encouraged his tai chi apprentice teachers to do the Arica work. It was "part of the picture." The emphasis on dantian in tai chi and kath work in Arica certainly helped acknowledge the relatedness of the two traditions.

In New York, I lived in a house in Gramercy Park with five other Aricans, and we all meditated and took tai chi classes together. Sherry Kent was my first teacher. I can still hear her saying, "And everything arrives together." I got a job working for Arica as a typist, first typing up Oscar's old lectures and then learning typesetting. Pat Gorman, Patrick's girlfriend and the first apprentice, worked there, too. Patrick would come to the office during lunch to teach tai chi.

I remember watching Patty like a hawk, which made her very uncomfortable, but I was thirsty for knowledge. I don't think I had even finished the form when Patrick asked me if I wanted to learn to teach. I was honored and pleased to join a large group of Aricans, which was the first apprenticeship group. Patrick considered us the Arica Tai Chi school, and we felt we were on a mission to bring tai chi and consciousness to humanity.

Over the next ten years in New York, I devoted myself to the Arica work and to studying and teaching tai chi. I loved my community of friends and establishing tai chi studios. Our first winter tai chi training was three weeks long! Our first summer training was also three weeks! I don't know how we found the time or money. We expanded and taught apprenticeships and met on Friday evenings for Push Hands practice, in addition to teaching two nights per week. I continued to live with other Aricans and do the Arica programs offered. Many were hosted at the tai chi studios. In the early days, the Arica work was part of the apprenticeship program. But after a while, it became clear that we could not coerce people into doing the Arica work, and, sadly, we dropped that requirement.

Still, Oscar and the Arica work enormously influenced our tai chi school. Oscar came up from New York to one of our summer trainings in Massachusetts and gave a talk on martial arts. We offered many introductory Arica programs at these summer trainings. Our goal was to serve

others using tai chi and Arica work. The tools of dantian awareness, internal meditative focus, slow, relaxed breathing, open process, transcendence of ego, and giving and receiving feedback supported my growth and helped our school grow.

I was very happy to be on this mission. In 1980, I met my future husband, also a practitioner of the Arica work (and sometimes tai chi). Five years later, we moved to Los Angeles, where we continue to do the Arica work, and I teach tai chi. I still attend summer and winter tai chi trainings (only a week now) and still serve the school as a senior teacher and Legacy Holder. Many tai chi players and Aricans have left for other spiritual paths, but I always stayed because I love my communities of friends, the effect of doing tai chi and Arica meditation trainings, and the philosophy that underlies both. *All is Mind. All is One. We are One. For the benefit of all.*

When I first started Arica work, I thought I would become enlightened and a fully realized being. Do I think I am enlightened now? The dictionary defines enlightened as freed from ignorance and misinformation. So yes, I feel much freer of the programming we are all subjected to by our parents and society as we grow. I feel happy and more self-aware, and I am better able to observe my mind. But I am still a work in progress—kind of like tai chi. I let go of my early goal of becoming a tai chi master and settled instead for growth and service. I love studying and teaching tai chi, and I love our tai chi community. And, again, I am still a work in progress, ever learning and growing. As The Tai Chi Foundation celebrates our 50th Anniversary, I am grateful for playing a part in the school's mission, "To improve health, well-being, and awareness through the practice, study, and teaching of tai chi and qigong" for the benefit of all.