

BUT CLARENCE



# Clarence to: tea

Forget community service, a US judge packs offenders off to a course in Eastern spirituality, says Sharon Krum

Standing in the Santa Fe Municipal Court building to the judge handed down her sentence, Megan Rodriguez thought that she must be on Canal Canons. After pleading guilty to one charge of domestic abuse (hurling a lamp at her boyfriend), Rodriguez, 19, was sentenced to a Japanese tea ceremony, Tai chi classes, acupuncture and 12 weeks of meditation.

"When I got the sentence, I felt thinking what is the judge saying? Medi-what? A meditation sentence? I asked the court clerk if this was for real. I was sure I would get community service and pick up garbage like everyone else."

But in a move that is causing amazement in some quarters and applause in others, depending on what side of the New Age fence you stand on, the City of Santa Fe, in the American state of New Mexico, is pioneering an alternative sentencing programme that has offenders taking deep breaths instead of cleaning their local city square. And no, it is not a joke.

"The idea is to show these offenders, most of whom are convicted of domestic abuse, that using certain techniques, you can learn to control the impulse to be violent," says Mark De Francis, a psychologist at the New Mexico Corrections Department, a director of oriental medicine and brains behind the new programme. "Tai chi was simply a martial art, an ancient movement, in particular, teaches that what you thought was slow, a reflexive, uncontrollable movement, can be brought under enough control."

It was late last year when the Santa Fe Municipal Court Judge Francis Galligan approached a local "teaching centre" for an alternative to the standard "community service" and "anger management" training sentencing options. "She said that there were enough anger management recidivism rates was still too high."

De Francis suggested that the judge adopt an Eastern approach to the problem, given that the Western solution was failing. In fact, scientific studies have shown that meditation reduces stress levels, while a 2002 study reported in the journal of Behavioral Medicine found that Tai chi could increase immunity and reduce stress.

With the judge's imprimatur, De Francis set about designing a programme that would teach offenders how to manage their emotions, all based on the principles of Eastern spirituality. Today the 12-week course, held twice a week, begins with Tai chi, followed by a tea ceremony, open discussion, then ends with a 20-minute meditation and acupuncture.

It also teaches them to slow down their physical bodies. De Francis says it has multi-faceted approach. "The tea ceremony teaches people to slow down their minds. Meditation, through visualisation and breathing, shows them that they can calm their minds. This is a new concept for them, but very empow-

What you do for, buddy? Offenders have to master Tai chi, meditation and a tea ceremony

## GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

Recruiting Tai chi and meditation to the fight against crime might sound a typically wacky American fad, but in fact the two oriental methods are quietly being put to the same use in Britain. The Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, best known for introducing the Beatles to transcendental meditation (TM), has created the Natural Law Party to promote global harmony. His movement works in Merseyside, the Fab Four's old home.

The Maharshi believes meditators have a calming halo effect on their environment and has set up a group of about 300 martra choruses in Shettlestondale who practise TM together in the morning and evening. The Natural Law Party claims that the experiment's result, published in the Journal Psychology, Crime & Law, was that crime rates in Merseyside have dropped by 60 per cent relative to UK national trends.

A follow-up study found "greatly improved quality of life and economic vitality in Merseyside during subsequent years", it says.

When the local police may not be keen to credit the yogic lying squad, the Maharshi does have authoritative backers. Sir Haakon, the Professor of Economics at York University, says: "I have been following research on the Maharshi Effect over the past 20 years. His conclusions are so strong that I demand action from those responsible for government policy."

The TM movement would like to teach prisoners to meditate, says Jonathan Hinds, its director: "The Home Office would let us go into prisons even though they are not supposed to do so."

Followed studies also have shown that TM helps to cut out re-offending rates. But the Home Office remains such sceptical, the Staffordshire probation office is teaching Tai chi in its Drug Treatment and Testing Order programme. Don Dunlop, a probation officer, has run sessions with offenders for more than a year, and Ryan Rogers, one of the men on the drug treatment programme, says: "It helps you feel good about yourself and calms you, which is very important when you are coming off drugs."

Tai chi may sound all peace and love, but has been mistaken for something more sinister. Last October, police near Hemel Hempstead discovered that a man reported acting suspiciously in a local wood was just trying to help his "holding the Tai chi stance, away from spying eyes. It's, peace, officer."

JOHN NAUSH

ing." In fact during the meditation, De Francis insists that offenders wear a sleeping mask to block all visual stimuli, then floods the room with aromatherapy. Once they are sufficiently relaxed, he places an acupuncture needle between their eyes to generate emotional balance. Unsurprisingly, new arrivals to the class often resist their court-mandated "touchy feely" classes, not to mention the acupuncture needle, which De Francis says takes some coaxing. "In the beginning some clearly don't want to be there," he says. "They have never encountered Eastern practices and don't understand what they're going to happen. Some joke, disrupt or refuse to participate." But he adds, with a note of triumph: "Over time they start to respond to the classes. The men really like Tai chi, particularly the idea that you can still be a warrior without hurting anyone. The females I find are better at meditation. I think once women become mothers, they learn patience faster."

This was the case with Rodriguez, whose first impression of the class was: "This is too weird. I couldn't believe my sentence didn't involve any type of punishment, that all I was supposed to do was learn about being calm." But Rodriguez, who works in an animal shelter, says she was intrigued enough to participate in all the disciplines and believes that she has benefited. "The Tai chi and the meditation taught me that you

might get angry in a moment but that things pass and just to breathe and control it down."

Tetris Ortiz, a 36-year-old manager charged with resisting arrest, told friends that his sentence was to show up at a meditation class, and their jaws dropped. But he is now a glady convert. After completing the programme, he's sure he will never set foot in a courthouse again. "I got a lot out of Tai chi. It taught me to control my strength, and relaxed me." He also credits the tea ceremony with teaching him to communicate gently with others, particularly at work. "My co-workers have really noticed a difference." He says that meditation showed him "that if you think you can't calm your mind down, you're wrong. You can. When I get angry now, I think about what I'm going to say before. I'd just start yelling."

All of this is music to Mark De Francis's ears (he concedes that there are some offenders who don't derive any benefit because of their continued resistance to the programme), but whether this kind of alternative punishment will reduce recidivism remains to be seen.

De Francis says that anecdotal evidence is promising. "When I run into graduates of the programme, they tell me the benefits have been ongoing. I hope that statistics will prove the importance of incorporating mind-body-spirit programmes into alternative sentencing everywhere. I believe the solution in life is finding your inner, rather than outer, opponent to do battle with."

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