

Taiji Quan Utopia

BY FRED BEHAR

Utopia is a striving towards an objective that is beyond reality. It is the vision of an ideal which bypasses reality and therefore might seem unattainable. A utopian, or 'utopianizer', is someone looking for an ideal that is seemingly inaccessible. Taiji Quan, as described in the Classics, is a utopian practise.

This can be explained by the fact that Taiji is more philosophical than martial, at least as this word is generally understood. It is martial in the sense that it fights our unconscious side, our dark, instinctive, emotional side, and this with the tacit aim of allowing our conscious, bright, reasoning, reflective side to prevail. In this way, it is an internal martial art (i.e. turned towards our inner self) that is practised together with a partner in a meditative state, close to what some call "the flow".

In the Classics, Taiji Quan is based on Taoist principles, non-action and non-being. As such, it is a philosophical art that reaches into psychology, because it brings about significant changes in our outlook on life, as well as in our behaviour and personality.

Mastery of this art remains beyond the ability of ordinary people, because it is actually based on non-knowledge, the innate knowledge we all have at birth before we experience anything. Taiji teaches us to unlearn; it attempts to bring us back to a state of mental vacuum similar to that of a newborn.

It is a practise during which we discover, learn and act in the present moment. We are in the present moment, when comparison and the predefined do not exist, when the emerging movement remains new, pure and unique.

It is a utopian practise because our consumerist society, which exploits the instinctive side of our brain and our self-centredness, is the antithesis of the Taoist philosophy at the core of Taiji Quan.

Unfortunately, Taiji as it is practised today, reflects our society. Indeed, by giving pride of place to the movements, which are performed through muscle contraction and against an opponent, it strengthens our instincts and our ego. By contrast, Taiji Quan as described in the

Classics leads to humility and the dissolution of the ego through the practise of non-action.

Let's note in passing that, according to a survey, 90% of the population consider themselves to be 'above average'. By considering themselves superior without even having a reference point, those 90% can be regarded as self-centred people governed by their instincts.

It may be utopian to want to change society, as it is utopian to want to reinstate the practise of Taiji Quan as described in the Classics, because this Taiji does not enhance the ego. Quite the contrary, it aims to change our worldview by making us leave aside our dark side, our instincts and our self-centredness, in order to lead us towards our bright side, a spiritual awakening, where our advanced cognitive functions regain control of our life. (Let us not forget that the subconscious mind dominates 95% of our lives.)

Through the practise and "mastery" of this Taiji, one realises the futility of violence and strength, because the more strength the opponent uses, the stronger the response will be. It is the action of the opponent that causes their defeat, so the opponent ends up being afraid to attack. It is the victory of non-violence over aggressiveness. If the majority of people reacted in this way through life, one would witness a change in mentality and a decrease in violence. It would be the victory of man's advanced faculties over instinctive primary functions; it would prove the superiority of reasoning over raw force.

One could draw a parallel between this practise and the law of Karma, where bad deeds boomerang. This leads to moral life principles, to another way of thinking, which could be summed up thus: "Don't do unto others what you don't want done unto you" and "Your freedom stops where that of others begin."

If those principles were put in practise, as it is said in the Tao Te Ching, the world would be a paradise, the law would be in our hearts, all things would be in harmony. The world would transform itself, people would be happy in their daily lives, they would live in harmony and be free from desire.

However, even the mere thought of such a world is out of reach for 90% of the population, because they cannot conceive of a world different from theirs.

Self-centredness is characterised by a tendency to look at everything from one's own perspective. Self-centred people focus mainly on their own interests, think their opinion is the only valuable and valid one, and see themselves as a model to be liked and followed. Self-centred people want to believe that they are the masters of their destiny and of their Taiji, and so they have altered the practise to make it accessible, so much so that it has lost its soul and its principles.

Unfortunately, both our world and Taiji as it is practised today are dominated by primal instincts. Today, violence only meets violence, ensuring its perpetuation. Primal instincts breed violence in an endless cycle.

As long as Taiji is in the hands of self-centred people governed by their instincts, it will not be able to return to its original purpose, which would require us to pursue the path of our evolution, the one that would lead us to wisdom.

It is through evolution that we emerged from an animal state to a human one. It is evolution that shaped our cognitive functions, turning us

into conscious beings capable of reasoning.

But, not unlike a Taoist sage who wants to plant the seeds of doubt in those who believe that they know, although I myself do not have the ultimate truth, I would like to get some people to start doubting. Unfortunately, most people will be blinded by their self-centredness, unable to glimpse any other truth than the one they have, simply because they would have to question themselves and are unable to do so.

I would like to be inspired by Taoism, but maybe I am just a utopian, aspiring to an ideal practise as described in the Taiji Quan Classics, far from the constraints created by our instincts. Or I might be a utopian simply because I have faith in human intelligence and I believe that the current trend can be reversed.

If that is the case, then I am indeed a Taoist and a utopian, because I do have faith in human intelligence and hope to guide people towards a reasoned and mindful practise, away from the current practise where force and voluntary movement are the rule, and which for that reason is the direct opposite of the principles enshrined in the Taiji Quan Classics.

Fred Bebar began his martial art studies in 1975. He has been studying Taiji since 1985 and teaching it since 1991. He practises the Taiji style of Yang Jian Hou, as well as "The Way of Non-Force" in push hands, which follows the principles advocated by the Taiji Classics.

"Taiji Quan and Tao" is a Facebook public group open to all practitioners wishing to explore the links between Taiji Quan and Taoism.

