

This article is a translation and transliteration of an article published in the Shaolintaiji Magazine. Translated first into Chinglish and then into this article by Dr Paul Butler, so some words are changed but the textual content is as it should be.

Demystifying Taiji Quan

Taiji Quan philosophy is so profound, it is deserving of a lifetime's research and study. Because this philosophy was formulated in an age where there was insufficient scientific knowledge to clearly explain its subtleties, some training methods and theory were explained in a style so that future generations could understand it in the context of their own era. However, this has led to misinterpretation and mystification of the theories, especially among modern-day Taiji enthusiasts, and beginners. For example, what is "Taiji Nei gong?" or "dantien rotation"? Many people practise a lifetime of Taiji Quan but are still unable to resolve these very basic questions.

This article suggests that, through prolonged practice and training, when the body's joints are loosened, the tendons are stretched and elongated, when all parts of the body are co-ordinated in motion, and every gap between the joints has developed elasticity – this elasticity, the stretching of the tendon added to whole body co-ordination is what is known as Taiji Nei gong (Taiji internal skill or inner force).

Traditional Taiji Quan practice involves conscious awareness of the Dantien and what is known as dantien rotation. As far as dantien rotation is concerned, it is simply a requirement (at first) for a person to focus on the dantien region during practice. The dantien, according to the study of jingluo (meridians), is situated in the lower abdomen about three fingers below the navel. In this area there is a concentration of internal organs, mainly reproductive and excretory organs. Concentrating one's mind intent on the dantien region has several benefits: it can lower the body's centre of gravity making the lower plane (xia pan) very steady and balanced. It also enables massage of the internal organs, thus increasing the functions of those organs; It can focus the mind-intent (yi nien) so that when you are practising your tai chi you are actually resting your mind (meditative movement); it also enables (in time) the execution of dantien breathing, or abdominal breathing which increases lung capacity.

Long-standing practice of Taiji Quan enables the jingluo (meridians) to be open and free of obstruction, thereby increasing the circulation of blood.

Internal martial artists call this Nei Qi. This form of Qi can undeniably improve the health. Many old martial texts advocated that using Qi in attacking an opponent can render you indestructible, capable of penetrating anything. If taken literally it becomes supernatural, perhaps even entering the realm of myth. Whether it is described as Nei Qi or Nei gong, as long as a method is executed correctly then it is not magical but rather a technique. In actual martial application technique is required. This technique is acquired only through long-term training of the body so that reactions are sensitive and reflexive. To achieve this there must be the utmost co-ordination of the mind and body and recognition of the precise moment of opportunity. Amongst other attributes, this requires speed, alertness, positional awareness and the execution of the appropriate technique. For example: in shuai-fa (throwing techniques) it is necessary to know where all the leverage points are and how to take advantage of them. With the use of Na fa (grasping methods) it is necessary to know the anatomical position of the reversible joints, use of a fulcrum and an understanding of the dimension and movement boundary of the joint; with Da fa (hitting method) you must have an understanding of timing and distance.

Chinese culture is steeped in allegory and religious beliefs that cannot be explained in practical terms. This has given some people the opportunity to exploit and perpetuate a condition by using myth to explain a superstition or superstition to explain myth. Unaware people can easily be led down an incorrect path. In the last twenty years Taiji Quan development and teaching in the west has been influenced and affected by this. Using such ambiguity to explain something that is quite practical is detrimental to the art. Many people who are propagating this mystical and mysterious form of Taiji are actually quite genuine in their beliefs. What are worse are those who use this to exploit the many sincere people who are striving to seek the truth.

Traditional Taiji studies have many abstract writings. How do you sort it out in your mind? If the texts cannot be explained in practical terms, if you cannot use them to elevate your Taiji skill, then surely they are of little use. Not so, In order to be able to understand Taiji you must be able to study objectively. In the research of this ancient philosophy you need to adopt a modern scientific approach. For example, using the science of the body (physiology), the science of movement (kinetics), using the science of the mind (psychology) etc to explain what appears to be shrouded in mystery. Using the study of body mechanics and movement to explain, for example, the saying “using four ounces to deflect a thousand pounds”. In this way you

can get away from the fanciful supernatural interpretations and concentrate instead on the reality of an ancient system that is both real and practical.

18th Generation Chen Taiji teacher Chen Zhaokui stood out as a teacher who was able to explain Taiji using the language of the body to explain the philosophy of Taiji. The unique teaching method of Chen Zhaokui was that he could understandably and clearly explain the requirement of every part of the body for every movement. This was considered a big leap forward at the time.

The theory of Taiji Quan is as deep and as wide as an ocean. For a beginner who has just entered into the art it can be extremely difficult to understand. For instance in the process of learning a frame, the student must gradually master the movement principle. To understand one or two points is considered not bad, as it is not possible to understand every aspect at once. Improvement occurs in a systematic manner over time. For example, a requirement of all the basic movements is that the two outer extremities section (hands and feet) hold the energy, the two middle sections (elbows and knees) hold the position and the two root sections (shoulders and kua) relax. To do all of this simultaneously is very difficult so it is better perhaps to concentrate on one point at a time and then over time progress to a fuller understanding, it is due to this systematic learning that it is so necessary to continually go over the same piece of taiji so many times.

Taiji Quan as a full system has been practiced for over three hundred years and shows no signs of waning. In fact it is gaining in strength. For its continuing acceptance and understanding it has to be viewed according to modern understanding and knowledge, using this form of understanding to decipher what is very ancient.