

Quiescence and Vigilance in Tai Chi Chuan

Ram

Preamble

Delicately and with a voluptuous spiral movement the leaf from the tall beech tree detached itself from its branch and landed on the flaming bed made by its companions.

That autumn, that morning, while I was observing this unique event, I began to reflect on the emotion I felt in its probably universal connotation. Like aesthetic feeling, a great many concepts affect living beings in the deepest part of themselves, and come from the depths of the cognitive processes, those determinants that are innate dispositions to feel and know. Those depths have a reality and a meta-historical, infra- and extra-verbal dimension.

When people talk about the reasons and extent of reciprocal East–West influence, the integration of certain ways of thinking and acting in relation to the arts, of social, philosophical or religious systems, there is clearly a mutual awakening of latent dispositions, as naturally as warmth and light are felt when coming close to a flame. Indeed, supposing that we make our choices ‘freely’, is it not true to say that we choose quite spontaneously what seems beneficial for us in the period of deprivation and maturation we are going through? As regards concepts and behaviour, would we be open to what does fit in with either a need or a prospect of greater well-being? Even cultural or religious constraints introduced after bloody conquests ended by being assimilated eventually via those of their components that responded to a certain expectation or encountered receptive inclinations on the part of individuals who integrated and then transformed them.

To tell the truth we could have avoided those contemporary questions and remained in the context of intense emulating exchanges if since the Greeks of the Portico many centuries had not rolled by before we discovered a certain freedom to think, express and act. In addition the fact that distances have been cancelled out or are quickly crossed now puts us within reach of all the marvellous experiences and creations achieved and transmitted through human beings, wherever they are. Thus

Copyright © ICPHS 2003

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com

0392-1921 [200311]50:4;33–38;039714

we are today becoming aware of multicultural influences of every kind, whether intellectual, artistic or religious, that are likely to reveal us more effectively to ourselves by increasing our ability to perceive. In practice this occurs by awakening innate potential within our cognitive organization and not by adopting mental habits.

Would we be indefinitely condemned to express our surprise at obvious cultural facts such as the parallel development, in faraway regions and different ages, of the same questions and comparable systems of thought? For instance, is it so surprising to discover that, from the third to the 12th century, Asia was one of the principal centres of culture, that phenomenology and cognitive psychology developed¹ there in accordance with forms appropriate to the logicians' schools?² That those strands of thought were deeply imbued with the exceptional dimensions of the mystical life that expressed itself on the Infinite Subjectivity of knowledge and the intimate interiority of consciousness. There where intelligence, depth and breadth of vision were established and developed is what makes our lives both more fluid and exciting, and we implicitly feel a sense of familiar attraction and conviviality towards it.

Thus it was when I discovered Tai Chi Chuan (pronounced Ty-jee choan), an age-old art developed in China and brought to Europe and the USA some 40 years ago.³ Very quickly I realized I was faced with an exceptional example of movement. It could be presented wholly as a martial art or as an exercise for health or from the viewpoint of a way to access interiority itself in the pure Taoist tradition.⁴

Centring and continuity of intention

In the art I was fascinated from the very first by the intimate symbiosis it brought about between slowness, fluidity and continuity of movement. Simultaneous concentration and relaxation were involved and intertwined in a diversified way, both on the cognitive level and in motor expression. The slow speed of the movement⁵ was not in any way a kind of braking or holding back. It was anticipated in a cognitive register that ensured the continuity at one and the same time of the motor action and its kinaesthetic links.⁶ It seemed clear that integrating and reproducing the external model did not use the only conceptual paths. Producing an inner model, a transition phase essential to the inductive anticipation of movement, took place in a cognitive 'incubator' that was able to generate continuous rhythm and movement. Because of the normal discontinuity of sensations and concepts Tai Chi Chuan possessed a unique efficiency in this regard: it stimulated the act of inner 'centring', achieving an experience of the self that combines interiorization, whether conscious or not, stability of the interoceptive⁷ referential and motor pluricompetence. When the area of the rise of the non-conceptual conscious is made manifest, the conscious base, like an emerging stable source, would ensure the continuity of all its cognitive transcriptions, especially that of motor intentionality.⁸

The hidden efficiency of the slow rhythm

Currently Tai Chi Chuan appears as a mosaic of different schools and styles: Chen, Yang, Wu, Sun style, etc. Many basic elements are common to all these strands: strings of movements of shorter or longer duration expressing interlinked martial situations, the quest for perfect motor fluidity and a unity of the body in its slightest actions. With each of the current styles there are successions of movements performed without a partner and 'pair exercises' that require the presence and complementary action of another person.

The fascination of Tai Chi Chuan is largely due to the continuity of the slow pace and the perfect motor ease through which it is expressed. Slow uninterrupted movement is one of the main characteristics of the Tai Chi Chuan style developed by Mr Yang Chen Fu (1883–1936), whose teaching I received from one of his students, Mr Li Guang Hua (1914–1977).⁹ Previously the alternation of slow and fast pace seemed to be the norm with most Tai Chi Chuan styles.¹⁰ Surprisingly this slow motion does not appear to have given rise to much questioning or discussion. In all likelihood this is because its presence in Tai Chi Chuan fitted with a certain martial orientation or because the grace of movement performed at that pace was in itself an adequate response. Among the many classical examples that illustrate the slow movement we might highlight the ones that are most frequently cited:

- the situation that demands a very high level of motor precision to accomplish a non-repetitive task;
- concentration of the vital potential via an intensive vigilance before an 'explosive' momentary action, for instance modulated diversion of the aggressor who is preparing to attack his target;
- quest for a high degree of perceptive attention and a massive but also selective integration of kinetic and proprioceptive¹¹ information.

These different reasons for the slow pace at which Tai Chi Chuan is performed appear to suit most people who practise the art. It is probably no coincidence that, as far as I know, only one master¹² passed on some experiential details on this matter that showed the slow pace of movement in a totally different light, the deep interiority of the consciousness. Having mentioned the effects of this slow pace on the respiratory activity of the lungs, and on the circulation of the inner breath (*Qi*), Yang Chen Fu expressed the hidden basis of slowness in a brief sentence: 'Where there is slow pace', he said, 'there is an empty room.'¹³ The phrase 'empty room' indicates the presence of *Wu*, the inexpressible quintessence of vacuity. This reference is all the more significant since its author is talking here of a personal experience and does not insert any causal process between slow pace and vacuity. Indeed he posits the co-occurrence of inner quiescence and slow pace. He does not insist that the pace should induce that presence, or that a certain vacuity should be the basis for the pace of movement in Tai Chi Chuan. In fact the quest for the register of slow pace is an act of centring that has more in common with a simple impulse and its repetition than with a gradual means. But as soon as vacuity is there it absorbs all consciousness of the self, imbues the whole bodily consciousness and, residing in the centre of all

cognitive orientation, holds motor intentionality in balance between quiescence and extreme vigilance.

Though Mr Yang Chen Fu speaks from the perspective of direct experience, it is nevertheless true that, because slowness of movement implies an act of inner centring combined with the psycho-sensory expansion of the level of centring achieved, is above all an experience of very significant intensification of vigilance. This intensification affects both the act of centring, however instantaneous, and the 'magnification'¹⁴ of the cognitive tools once centring has been established.

Slowness, centring and processing of sense information

First it is important, once and for all, to distinguish the slowness of movement expressed in Tai Chi Chuan from a banal and very basic connotation, a holding-back movement and a limited psychomotor process. On the contrary, we are confronted with a very high level of movement management that requires a specific and rare cognitive control. Let us take the example of natural reflex movement: most of the time it is a matter of a practical anticipation that highlights the starting point of the movement, the trajectory it should follow and the achievement of the objective. The trajectory is determined by the required result; very often this trajectory is hardly conscious since the attention is focused on remembering the objective and motor anticipation. And so our proprioceptive and kinaesthetic consciousness is composed of 'peaks' of consciousness on the sense spaces of starting and ending motor actions, balanced by moments of attention stasis of weak intensity and less specific perceptions. The art of Tai Chi Chuan cannot accommodate this kind of cognitive functioning. Indeed, though the trajectories of the limbs and the changes in the body axis are continually anticipated, each 'momentary point' of movement demands a total attention whose intensity alone is able to prevent 'memory lapses' as regards the objective and any perceptual stasis.

But this demand for concentration would very quickly exhaust our neural resources if a fundamental cognitive emergence were not simultaneously taking place in the background and within the attention activity. It is a matter of what I call 'cognitive relaxation'. Present in all cognitive processes and registers, it is that malleability and ability to widen the field of consciousness that is the nourishing atmosphere of concentration. This inner relaxation is scarcely if at all conscious in most people. It becomes more obvious when changes of register occur that require a greater mobilization of cerebral resources or when sense development frees itself from a level of momentary synthesis. However, beyond its continual presence as a dominant factor in attention processes, this motor of aptitude proceeds in an emerging manner from the ungraspable hub concealed by the density of identity. What becomes the malleability of the confluent consciousness in the act of attention reveals itself, in the heart of the sovereign subjectivity of consciousness, to be a living quiescence, inborn, bottomless, the discovery of which is the very path to centring.

Now perhaps we can see more clearly how one of the natural implications of slowness of movement is almost inevitably a quest for an increase in ability to concentrate and perceive. That this search itself leads us, directly or in a certain

progression, to call reflexively on the generator of ability that engages more consciousness in any cognitive orientation. This generator is at the very heart of the conscious person and prolongs, in the cognitive apparatus, that innate Quiescence referred to by the 'road back'.¹⁵ Thus the emergence of many cognitive abilities and resources allows us to process optimally sensory, interoceptive and proprioceptive information. This processing is not only accelerated but also qualitatively richer. In fact motor anticipation is much more precise. Handling more psycho-sensory information and perceptual nuances in a shorter timespan and movement space gives the movement exceptional spatiality and density. That is one of the aspects I find most interesting in the practice of the art.

Finally we should mention slowness of movement, not as a natural pretext for interiorization and intensification of cognitive activity as a whole but like a result: that of a rhythmic regulation from fully established inner centring. Without the least effort presence to oneself is irradiated by a 'current' that takes up the whole inner space of consciousness with its breadth and force. Thus slow pace expresses the fullness that is inscribed in each conscious moment. Inner density, expansive overflowing of the conscious flux, innate concentration, these among others are some of the simultaneous experiences that will colour anticipation and translate into fluidity of movement along with slow pace. That is the apparent paradox of this rhythm which can hardly be called slow. Concentrated, dense, broad would be better suited to express its perfect kinetics.

*

To conclude this brief look at one of the aspects of Tai Chi Chuan, we should think of how it evokes what we naturally possess in our psychological structures and our desire to become aware of all the dimensions of existence. Such an art affects us far beyond any cultural rapprochement and is among the noblest of human legacies one can be acquainted with. If it touches us so deeply that is because we carry within us, and have always done, the inclinations it arouses.

Ram

Champtercier, France

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Particularly during late Buddhism and the Shivaism of Kashmir. On late Buddhism, see especially: T. Stcherbatsky, *La Théorie de la connaissance et la logique chez les bouddhistes tardifs*, Paris, Annales du Musée Guimet, no. 36, Paul Geuthner, 1926; Lilian Silburn, *Instant et cause, essai sur le discontinu dans la pensée philosophique de l'Inde*, Paris, Jean Vrin, republished by De Boccard, 1989; *Aux sources du bouddhisme*, texts translated and presented under the direction of Lilian Silburn, Paris, Fayard (republished 1997). On Kashmiri Shivaism the translations with commentaries by Lilian Silburn and André Padoux are a priceless treasure; among others see the *Spanda Karika*, *Siva sutra*, *Vathulanatha sutra*, *Tantra Loka*, etc. These texts are published by the Institut de la Civilisation Indienne, Collège de France, De Boccard.

2. Especially in Dharmakirti and Dignaga, see T. Stcherbatsky, 1926, *op. cit.*
3. In the 1970s, when I met the Chinese expert who became my teacher, there was only a tiny number of teachers of the art in Paris. It was in the 1960s that a wave of publications on the discipline started to come out in Hong Kong, Taiwan, the US and then Europe.
4. For a classic presentation of Tai Chi Chuan, see in particular: Catherine Despeux, *Taiji Quan, art martial, technique de longue vie*, Paris, Guy Trédaniel, 1981; Jean Gortais, *Taiji Quan. L'Enseignement de Li Guanghua, la tradition de l'école Yang*, Paris (1st edn) 1981, (republished) Le Courrier du Livre 2002. See also T. Dufresne and J. Nguyen, *Taiji Quan, art martial de la famille Chen*, Paris, Budostore, 1997; this book lays particular emphasis on the role of the Chen family in transmitting Tai Chi Chuan and offers an almost entirely martial view of the art. See also Kristofer Schipper, *Le Corps taoïste*, Paris, Fayard, 1982; in this book the author, who is a brilliant sinologue, states that only the practice of Tai Chi Chuan is capable of giving a living experience of Tao.
5. Especially in the style carrying on what Mr Yang Chen Fu handed down.
6. From the Greek *kinesis* 'movement' and *aisthêsis* 'sensation'; designates the inner sensations of the movement of the parts of the body.
7. Refers to the sensitivity whose stimuli arise from the organism itself, particularly the deep organs.
8. On this whole topic see Ram, *L'Envol de la grue. Approche des processus cognitifs et de la gestion du mouvement à travers le Taiji Quan et certaines traditions d'Asie*, Méolans-Revel, Désiris, 2000.
9. See J. Gortais, 1981/2002, *op. cit.* In the 1970s Mr Li Guang Hua was invited to set up and teach Tai Chi Chuan classes within the School of Psychomotor Medicine at the Salpêtrière Hospital, Paris. He retained this position for several years alongside the private classes he gave.
10. In this connection see Catherine Despeux, 1981 *op. cit.*, and T. Dufresne and Nguyen, 1997, *op. cit.*
11. Proprioceptive sensitivity corresponds to the stimulation of muscles, bones or joints.
12. Mr Yang Chen Fu.
13. Jean Gortais, 1981/2002, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
14. In cognitive psychology this expresses the intensification of the capacity of one or several functions and the sense flows that proceed from it.
15. Tao-tö King, 16.