

Perspectives on Tai Chi, Somatics & Life, w/ *Sifu* John Loupos 2/1/18



Dear Reader: Each month I release a new complementary article on some aspect of Tai Chi or Somatics (my health care modality). If you are receiving this for the first time it's because your name has recently been added to the mailing list. Feedback and questions are always welcome. I hope you enjoy!

Fun With Words – Coming Full Circle With a Unicorn

I found myself inspired in composing this month's article - lighter fare, I readily admit - after listening to an interview on NPR about our ever-evolving lexicon. Each year new words, or new meanings for old words, make their move from the periphery into the mainstream. One such word that was included in this year's segment was "unicorn." Apparently, "unicorn" in popular parlance is a metaphor for some thing, quality, or goal that may be striven for, but is regarded as unattainable.

As I listened to the myself musing that coincidentally holds a martial arts tradition. unicorn is one of the associated with the are actually eight



segment I found the unicorn place in our internal Specifically, the eight animals BaGua tradition. There separate and

autonomous BaGua systems that stem from the Yin style branch, each premised on a designated animal, and one of which happens to be the unicorn. Relatively few BaGua practitioners are privy to this particular animal style. For whatever reason, the dragon has been the more widely disseminated of BaGua's eight animal disciplines, at least here in the west.

Back in the 1990s I had the privilege of hosting and studying with the late great

BaGua master, Dr. XiePeqi. Dr. Xie was one of a very few individuals known to have mastered all eight of the BaGua animal styles stemming from the Yin style lineage. In addition to my (albeit limited) studies with Dr. Xie, which included some exposure to the unicorn, I also had the opportunity to train at the more ubiquitous dragon style with my primary teacher at the time, the late Wei Lun Huang. While master Huang made no claim to expertise at the unicorn style, he did teach his own version of the eight BaGua animal qigong practices, one of which also happened to be the unicorn.



The late Dr. XiePeqi

Master Huang was a traditionalist in many ways, but I recall that he was generally more progressive than most of the Chinese teachers I've had the privilege of working with, though he could also be a bit temperamental at times. After teaching the eight BaGua animals to those of us in his community on multiple occasions, master Huang somehow settled upon the notion that portraying the unicorn as such was implausible given that the unicorn is a mythical animal and, therefore, less than credible (of course there's no such thing as a real unicorn). So he scrapped the unicorn (in name only) and renamed that particular qigong practice after the rhinoceros, which is a real animal with one horn (well... okay). He did this in all seriousness and actually took affront when it was drawn to his attention that the unicorn was not the only mythical animal represented in the pantheon of BaGua



animals, which also includes the dragon and the phoenix, neither of which is any less mythical a creature than the unicorn. However, master Huang's was mind was made up and no amount of logic was going to change it. I mean no disrespect to his memory, but I still prefer the unicorn designation. There is after all nothing wrong with a little harmless mythology.

After listening to the NPR segment I got to thinking, what are the unicorns that typically appear, or fail to appear for students, yet remain ever beyond their reach? Most everybody has a unicorn or two. To say you have no unicorns in your Tai Chi is tantamount to saying you "have arrived," having achieved perfect Tai Chi. We should all be so fortunate.

As unicorns go, this can be a deeply personal matter from student to student. For one student the unattainable may be feeling and mastering a sense of qi coursing powerfully and on demand. For another it may be to somehow get his shoulders to relax. Yet another student may struggle for an overall sense of Tai Chi presence in her life, while the next student hopes to someday finally commit all the moves of the Tai Chi form to memory.



The author in a Unicorn posture

As pesky and ethereal as they may seem at first glance, I think our unicorns serve us. We need unicorns in Tai Chi, as well as elsewhere in our lives to inspire us and motivate us to continually improve ourselves, and to avoid the complacency that occurs once we no longer have goals to accomplish.

Think about what unicorns you have in your life, and in your Tai Chi. And consider, as well, the contradiction that if your unicorn serves you in any way then maybe it's not a unicorn after all.

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