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Mystical Experiences Emerging From Stillness

This summer's Eastern Naturist Festival will include presentations by some mind and body experts, among them Jonathan Bricklin, offering "Tai Chi By Way of a Mystical Experience."

Jonathan says he came to Taiji in the early nineties, when he was 40, and five years after he had taken up a vipassana meditation practice. Vipassana means to see things as they really are. It has been taught in India since more than 2,500 years ago as a remedy for universal ills.

"I [was raised an agnostic Jew](#),"

Jonathan said. "Prior to taking up vipassana, my spiritual/holistic practice had been limited to weekly Alexander Technique sessions."

Alexander Technique focuses on reactive-body awareness, especially the so-called "turtle response": the habitual way one tenses up, contracting one's muscles toward one's center.

"It's an ongoing, subtle fear-response, and one that we are mostly unaware of doing," Jonathan said. "Taiji, I would later learn, also works with this same fear-response, but it was my experience with meditation,

not Alexander Technique, that directly led me to Taiji."

His Alexander teacher had recommended meditation as an adjunct to body work, encouraging Jonathan to sign up for a nine-day silent retreat at Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts.

"On that first retreat I had a mystical experience," he recalled. "The experience happened in stages, culminating — on the last day — in a kind of rapture. I will relate the details of that experience in my talk, but the most relevant detail for my path to Taiji was its aftermath. As I was re-

turning home, I felt myself squeezed more and more into the exact arising moment, with my consciousness emerging from a gap between thoughts. By the time I got home, I felt like I was living inside a Basho haiku — a form of poetry that he had created in response to his zen meditation experience, such as:

Old Pond

Frog jumps in

Sound of the water

“At any rate, the temporal landscape of past and future that the ‘I’ reverberates as had vanished. It was not that I had lost the sense of ‘I’ — in fact, as is not unusual for those accessing supremely blissful states, I had an exalted sense of self. But I had no ongoing reverberating sense, as in Alan Watt’s depiction of the ego as ‘a kind of flip, a knowing of knowing, a fearing of fearing ... a curlicue, an extra jazz to experience, a sort of double-take ... a dithering of consciousness which is the same as anxiety.’”

Along with speaking more about that mystical experience at the Eastern Naturist Festival, Jonathan said he will share a second mystical experience that he had on his next nine-day IMS Retreat the following year. He described it as a different mystical experience but with the same aftermath.

“Both blissful aftermaths lasted a week,” he said; “the first vanished with a dose of Haldol; the second with sex.”

He continued, “How this aftermath experience directly led to Taiji is as follows: One of the most noteworthy features of my living inside a Haiku was the absence of a feeling of effort whenever I moved. If the impulse arose to touch my head, my arm seemed to lift and arrive there



Jonathan Bricklin

without the slightest sense of resistance. When I walked, I had a magical feeling of ‘being moved’ — like what you feel in your first steps off of an electric treadmill.

“When I described this wondrous experience to a neighbor a few years later, she recommended that I study Taiji, as she was doing, with our local master, Rick Barrett. Rick is the author of [Taijiquan: Through the Western Gate](#), a classic exploration of qi (pronounced, and formerly spelled ‘ch’i’) — what Daoists consider to be the primal energy of the universe.

“Rick was also a national push hands champion — a competitive form of Taiji for two, where each tries to keep their balance while making the other lose theirs. Rick had won in all divisions, including the super-heavyweight division, two above his own weight class. That had never been done before.”

Jonathan explained that the key to

push hands mastery “is maintaining an untensed responsiveness to qi, rather than a tensed muscle reaction. The Daoists call it wei wu wei: doing non-doing. And, on my first day in Rick’s class, I glimpsed this wei wu wei, which felt like what I had experienced in the aftermath of my mystical experience.”

Wei wu wei is the essence of Taiji, “far more essential than the movements themselves, and without which Taiji is just pretty choreography,” Jonathan said. “Rick’s exquisite, almost infinitesimal, attention to wei wu wei in every movement has guided me for three decades. Rick and I have also become constant companions, helping me to reinforce the application of wei wu wei far beyond formal Taiji practice.”

He added, “While I ended my weekly Alexander sessions, I have vastly increased my awareness of the turtle response.”

Taiji has also significantly informed Jonathan’s theoretical explorations during the past three decades.

“My mystical experiences had given me a sense of accessing a hitherto hidden prime reality, setting me on a radical quest to explore the fundamental nature of consciousness,” he said, “but all that came to me as a distinct insight while they were transpiring were two words, one of them repeated: ‘whatever is, is.’ My books and articles are basically a commentary on that phrase; my Taiji practice its manifestation.

“A phrase of Krishnamurti also speaks to this convergence of my theorizing and my Taiji practice: “Effort is a distraction from what is.” In my [Foreword](#) to Rick’s second book, [finding You in the world of It](#),

I share more of that convergence.”

Jonathan recommends vipassana meditation and qigong to those seeking a mystical experience, suggesting, “Stillness, stillness, stillness. Being over doing. The more one downplays seeking and/or even doing, remaining relaxed but alert — present to the arising nature of all phenomena — the more the opportunity for ego transcendence arises.”

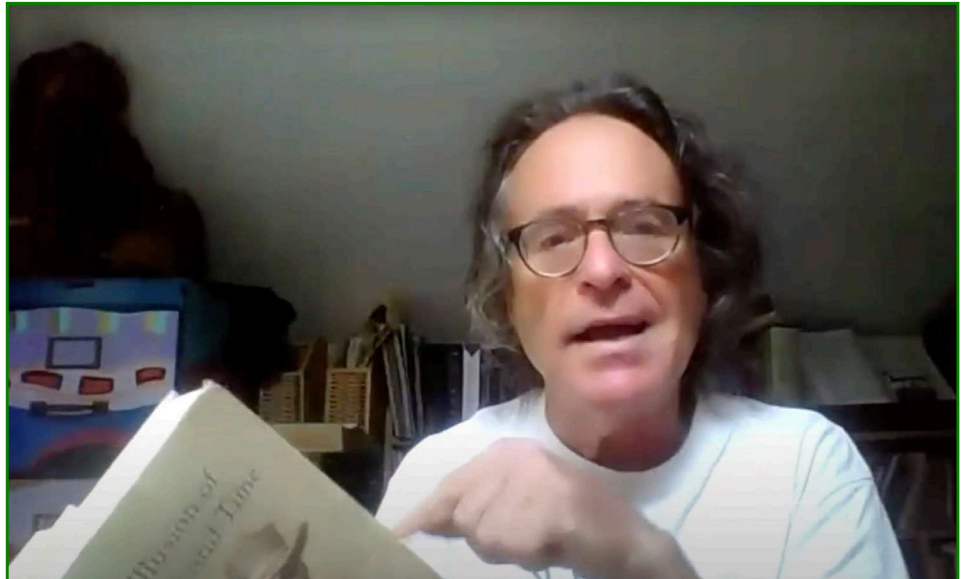
It was through Rick, who also taught at Eastover Estate and Eco-Village — the site of the Eastern Naturist Festival — that Jonathan came to form an association with Eastover’s owner, Yingxing Wang. When Jonathan retired as program director at the New York Open Center, he was not planning to do any more programming, “but Ying and Eastover both captivated me, and I started connecting her with some of my favorite teachers. Together we also revived the Insight Meditation Society’s Family Retreat, a few years after they had given up on it.”

According to Jonathan, “Ying is a marvel. I don’t know anyone like her. Despite her staggering responsibilities as proprietor of Eastover, and enmeshing herself in the minutest details of its operation, her commitment to spiritual practice and inquiry never wavers. She could tell me tomorrow that she was going to organize all of the Daoist Centers in the world, or she could tell me that she was going off to meditate for five years in a cave on Wudang Mountain. Neither would surprise me.”

Ying will be presenting her own program during the July 20 - 23 festival: “Qigong and Health”.

Jonathan said the setting of Eastover also won him over, especially its being hemmed in by a mountain range.

“Privacy for naturists, for sure,



but its natural seclusion from the outside world also enables a deeper, less worldly bound consciousness to emerge,” Jonathan said. “Nearby Kripalu feels like a very public hospital. At Eastover, you can incubate.

He said he has never addressed a naked audience before, “unless my holding forth in a hot tub at Esalen counts.”

Jonathan’s mother spent the last two decades of her life in Big Sur, and he said that, on his many visits, he would sit in their tubs overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

“Nakedness was the norm, and it definitely felt as if that norm contributed to the overall ease of the sublime experience,” he said.

However, “Sitting naked in a hot tub with other naked folk is one thing. Addressing a room full of naked people is another. This inverse of the familiar teacher’s nightmare — being naked in front of an audience — intrigues me. Why, for instance, is that such a common dream? Is it that, whenever we are lecturing, we are hiding vulnerabilities — both in what we are saying, and in who we really are?”

“A room full of committed naturists, though, as described in your lit-

erature, makes me keenly not anxiously intrigued. I, too, see social nakedness as more Edenic than erotic. Not that the erotic evaporates, but that our desire to see the naked bodies of others gets superseded by the desire to commune with others with whom we feel lesser degrees of separation than when we are clothed. Uniforms can unify a group, but mostly, it seems, clothes establish our individual, self identities. Indeed, by the Bible’s accounting, clothes were the first indication of self-consciousness. As I once wrote, “The serpent’s sales pitch notwithstanding, Adam did not gain knowledge when he bit into the apple; he didn’t discover fire, or how to graft a tree. The “knowledge” Adam gained was knowledge of self, which is not so much knowledge as belief.”

“The prime Buddhist teaching of anatta or ‘no self’ challenges that belief. So I do see nakedness as a step back in the right direction, even though I don’t anticipate Buddhists themselves disrobing publicly any time soon.”

To learn more about Jonathan Bricklin, check out his website, <https://www.jonathanbricklin.org>.

Eastern Naturist Festival: <https://easternnaturistfestival.square.site>