

We believe this was the 41st Summer Tai Chi Training we have put on in Europe and it was a good one. Eighty of us met, doing courses ranging from absolutely beginners to Advanced Form Work, Sword and Push Hands. People travelled from Canada, France, the United States, Portugal, Ireland, Austria, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. So, what was it like?

Our locale

We stayed in the rather grand town of Cheltenham, at Deans Close School, a residential boarding school about 20 minutes' walk from the town centre. Located on the southern edge of the classic English countryside of the Cotswolds, Cheltenham is the kind of place where tweed is worn even in the summer, and gentlemen of a certain age would not be seen without a tie and jacket when popping out to the local shop for a Sunday newspaper. Charming. Wales is just across the border and some of our guests toured the Welsh scenery before joining us for their tai chi in England.

Five, seven or nine days

As usual, some of us gathered for some tai chi a few days before the general public arrived, so a full nine days of quite intensive practice were possible. By day four, my legs gave up and relaxed as we say in tai chi parlance. Or as we say in the UK, "I was absolutely knackered." Thereafter, as usual, my legs were fine.



The teaching for us apprentices was fantastic. Greg Woodson and Paul Campbell led in the main teaching. Patrick and Patrice Wooldridge led in meditation. Patrice also led some of our usual summer form programmes, and Patrick also presented Sufi dance with both adding to the richness of the programme. Vanessa Costigan and Kate Mansfield contributed individual meditation/time in the art programmes. Vicky Shackford taught Hawaiian swimming once again.



Evening programmes included: Declan Rothwell taught about the five elements and acupuncture,

Johanna Koelman taught how to draw bears and owls; we had a walking tour of Cheltenham, and we had our usual movie night with a Q&A session afterward on films of the Professor. We finished with the traditional party to close off, with performances ranging from trombone and piano pieces to stand-up comedy, song and dance, and of course, the traditional sending up of teaching teams by their students. Afterwards we repaired to the bar and I think it's safe to say a good time was had by all.

Teaching programme – giving something back

In our initial planning for the training, we thought about a big, bold statement, asking ourselves if we could say, “any class you want, we will teach.” Surely, with eight apprenticeships, we would need 16 teachers, and we usually get 40 or so at a training. We did our mini-winter London/St Albans training in St Albans, with two apprenticeships there, in January this year, but other than that,

there have not been the opportunities to progress as teachers since our local schools' teachers stick with the same teaching teams and courses.

So, I'm really pleased that we ended up offering four apprenticeships and an experienceship. They were: B1 was taught by Joop Brouwer and Joan Campbell; B2 was taught by Kate Mansfield and Kevin Lannon; B3 was taught by Patrice Wooldridge and Vanessa Costigan; and Push Hands 1 Experienceship was taught by Greg Woodson.



I'm even more pleased with the spirit – it was a spirit of service.

Additionally for our students, classes ranged from Beginning Form, Fundamentals, Push Hands 1, Intermediate Form, Intermediate Form Consciousness and Apprentice Classes for Push Hands and Sword, both form and fencing.



The training was organised by the School of Tai Chi Chuan London, legal entity. Of the Trustees, our organising team was Barbara Carlisle, Sunil Hirani and Erica Crome. They did an absolutely great job!

The other two trustees, Ed Johnston and myself, were “yin” or “I’m really not doing any work on the training.” Being “yin” is a governance role, so it means keeping oversight of the finances, so our legal entity did not inadvertently get into difficulties over financial commitments. We also provided a sounding board for people doing the harder work.

The space – upsides and downsides

The upside was we could use everything. We had general use of a 50-acre sprawling school and grounds.

The downside was on occasion, between our booking and the training, the school scheduled for other parties, resulting in a bit of room rearranging for both teaching venues and accommodations. Plus, hot water systems, resting over the summer, had to come back to life and occasionally took a bit of reviving. The onsite pool shut down at short notice, resulting in a magical mystery tour of the swimming pools of Cheltenham for our swimmers. I once arrived at my class to find a grand piano in the middle of the teaching space. Well, summer training is not supposed to be an everyday teaching experience!



To end this on another upside, we enjoyed tea and snacks in a common room space, and we had use of the on-site theatre bar, where plenty of genteel socialising took place.

Public health

Of course, during this time of Covid, we had to think carefully about public health. We considered whether to even run the training or not, and we had a flexible, clear cancellation policy when we

decided to run it. We kept a close eye on the levels of Covid before the training. As we came closer to the date of the training, the UK started building to a record high level of Covid in the general population, and we could see we were going to be in the dip after the peak. While Covid levels are now at a low level, we had around 3% of the population infected at the time of the training in different areas of the UK.

We thought we had reasonable plans for Covid. Everyone was welcome to attend our training. Nowadays, most people are multiple-vaccinated and those that are not have their reasons. Given we can all get and spread the virus, no one was excluded from the training. We asked people to test before they travelled to the training and then again three days in. We had free tests available for people who did not have them.

We masked for Push Hands, and hand sanitised. Yet, we had three people come down with Covid during their time with us, which was in line with expectations. We supported them as we had planned to. A big thanks to the volunteers who supported our ill colleagues in their hours of need—Maria Gandler, Shao Lin, and Collette Nangle, as well as Vanessa Costigan and the organising team. A particular thank you to our colleagues across the water in Ireland, and the Tai Chi Foundation, which supported us before, during and after the training.

Not everyone was happy with our approach to Covid. Some would have had us take stronger measures, while others preferred less strong measures. We tried to maintain people's personal health confidentially in a public health situation, but let individuals know who had been in immediate contact with the people infected by Covid.



Some felt that by identifying the class where the infections had occurred and asking them to sit at a table apart and wear facemasks was singling them out pejoratively, which was certainly not the intention.

One person decided to leave a day earlier than planned but had completed the core parts of their training.

I would say that the lesson for organisers of trainings in this time of Covid, is to choose our health approach and risk tolerance, communicate it clearly before the training, modify if we have to, but know that if we wish to course correct during a training, our initial choices have already had an effect.

Conclusions

We have had post-pandemic experiences now with teaching at a winter training in St Albans, the autumn and spring trainings at Gotzens Austria, two summer trainings in the United States in Massachusetts and Washington, and now this summer training in the UK.

These are turbulent times and running our trainings will not be easy over the coming year or two. Yet despite the difficulties, it

has been high quality work and it's lovely to see that if we practice regularly, tai chi does not stop benefiting us.



Photos by: Ian Lopez, Patrice Wooldridge, Sas Vassie, Tess Lugos, and Johanna Koelman

