

Tai Chi Winter Training in the UK, January 2022

by

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On January 3, 2022, 23 apprentices and students came together for a Tai Chi Winter Training here in the UK. This is how it came about and what happened.

Every Sunday morning in the historic Royal Park at Greenwich, London, some of our tai chi community got together and practiced. We are located right on the Greenwich Meridian, at 0 degrees longitude. This provides a certain alignment to North facing tai chi rounds! After five rounds, perhaps a bit of sword, and some workshopping of our tai chi form, we retired to the café for a cup of tea or coffee and a chat.

As the pandemic eased over last summer, our thoughts around the outside table turned to the Winter Training. It had been two years since we last gathered in person for a Tai Chi Winter Training. For most of us in the UK, that was in Amsterdam. Anticipating the winter spike in the pandemic, we were not optimistic about the possibilities of international travel. We wondered; could we do a Winter Training here in the UK?

The UK school is mostly centred around Welwyn and St Albans in Hertfordshire, and the London school, with teachers in the Thames Valley and up in Lancaster in the North of England. We surveyed our apprentices to see what they thought. There was universal enthusiasm for a Winter Training, but almost everyone wanted to stay local for the winter, even



if Amsterdam or a US location put on a Training. We consulted with some of the legacy holders, and the TCF and felt supported in going ahead and putting on a Winter Training here in the UK.

Our small organising team formed, between London and Herts Tai Chi. We rapidly found a venue, the church where tai chi is taught in St Albans. If there is one thing almost all churches have, it's a high roof with a lot of

air volume and good potential for ventilation! The programme fell into place rapidly. We had a good sense, between us and our fellow apprentices, what we needed.

Pragmatically, we had people who needed apprenticeships. We committed to teaching an apprenticeship if there was more than one person who needed it. B2 and Fundamentals apprenticeships had enough participants, and on Monday the 3rd of January, our Winter Training started with apprenticeships. The rest of the training ran over Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, with a 12 noon to 6 PM timetable. We had four main components:

The first session explored 5 Element Qigong through the lens of emotions. We also looked at a meditation each day—breathing, visualisation and then body scanning.

The goal was to have people more comfortable with the use of 5 Element Qigong and with delivering simple meditations to their students. We looked at 3 different elements and emotions and worked them together in different positions. We finished with a meditation, showing how simple meditations could be delivered effectively from the angle of a particular person's embodiment of it.

The second section focused on teaching and learning. We looked at what was necessary for people to learn well: curiosity, and an experience of success.

We related this to tai chi by becoming curious about a tai chi question, finding a non-tai chi way of answering that question (ie experiencing success), then experimenting with finding that success back in the tai chi form. On day 1, we solicited apprentices to share what they were working on for themselves, and then they presented these on the 2nd and 3rd days.

Examples we offered to apprentices to kick this off were:

- Avoiding double-weighted arms, ie having one full, one empty (e.g. in constant bear)
- Finding the correct shoulder position (e.g. in practice of lift kicks)
- Using weight of leg to create "stretch of no stretch" in calves (e.g. in repulse monkey)

From these apprentices came back with and presented:

- Relaxing the kwa (particularly in moving weight forward and rotating)
- Finding the heaven from earth to create lightness (starting from yin yang breath)
- Unifying relaxation, breathing and centre (about the tan tien without using that word)
- Resting in the tan tien and paying attention with the body (feeling not thinking)
- Tai chi with injuries (every teacher shared the injuries they'd worked with)

The third session focused on reconnecting during push hands. Using the most direct connection and movements, we explored the unity of movement and sensitivity of response. It was wonderful to work in push hands again, even wearing facemasks.

The fourth session was sword which was nicely taught, with an excellent review of the form, and some fencing at the end. The liveliness and vitality of sword play really came out.

We finished with a party in the private rooms of a pub in town with food and drink, in a well ventilated, separate space. No training is complete until the party is done!

What made it work?

Critical mass. We had enough critical mass amongst our teaching teams, to be able to offer a good quality programme. We decided what we would and would not do. Without our legacy holders present, we could not offer some of the more advanced work that usually happens around these trainings, so we cut to what we could do within our own capacities.

Connection. It was great to get together. We were hungry to reconnect—while we are not far from each other, during the Covid lockdowns and restrictions, we'd not connected other than online or in our very local teaching locations.



Safety. We paid careful attention to Covid safety right from the start. We chose a spacious, well-ventilated space. Hand sanitisers were there, masks were worn during push hands, and most importantly, we asked everyone to take a lateral flow test each morning before attending. Financially, we offered to refund anyone not able to attend through illness or wishing to drop away if they did not feel right about attending. We went right up to the final week before the training, with a go/no go decision, on the very latest information and government advice.

Concluding thoughts:

We look forward to the depth and breadth of more normal Winter Trainings with our friends from across the school and input from our most senior teachers. Nonetheless, we were re-invigorated

by what we could do with each other and how we could progress in our tai chi practice and community.

We all look forward to seeing you again soon during another summer or winter training.

