

Teaching in South Wales

BY DAN O'GRADY

I teach Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan in the South East region of Wales. I have been practising tai chi for 11 years. Prior to this I did learn some Shingitai Aikido but that was over 25 years ago and so there is little to tell on that score. I have had a long-term interest in Daoist philosophy and so was well aware of the health benefits of practising tai chi. Following a trip to China and being impressed by the number of people participating in all sorts of moving exercises, I thought it time to find out more about this art.

In 2009 I joined a Wudang class. The Sifu provided a rounded and grounded experience, incorporating the chuan, chi gung, pushhands and applications in almost every session. This proved to be a valuable beginning to my training. After 4 years I felt the need to develop in a new direction by taking that oft quote adage “one learns through teaching”, seriously.

By coincidence (or synchronicity or whatever) I discovered that Sifu Dr. Mark Langweiler was running a college-based course aimed specifically at teaching tai chi chuan. A fellow student, Laurence, made the jump from the Wudang class at the same time. An immediate challenge was that of making the transition between tai chi styles i.e. Wudang to Wu. I had to learn to make smaller movements which, at first felt strange but very soon became natural.

Laurence and I were prepared for and were certified to teach Wu style tai chi chuan at beginner's level. This happened in August 2015 at the Archway Wu Academy in London. The accreditation, provided by Grandmaster Wu Kwong Yu, took place on the hottest day of that year and the requirements were exacting (as they should be if one is responsible for teaching others). I also received helpful feedback for further development.

Both Laurence and I continued to attend Sifu Mark's classes and teaching the sessions when he was unable to be there. We discovered that we had a different approach to the teaching role. Laurence will take a class if I am not available, but he doesn't relish teaching. I, on the other hand, love teaching. Before retiring from work,

my job was concerned with overseeing the development of social work students in practise based settings. In both the work and martial art settings I get a real pleasure from seeing people develop. When one sees a student working hard on the refinement of the form or asking question that they have obviously given a lot of thought to, therein lies the reward for me.

Whilst continuing in Sifu Mark's class, Laurence and I decided it would be good to have a class closer to home; home being Ferndale in the Welsh Valleys. This is not to be confused with the Wu Style Academy in Ferndale, Michigan U.S.A. The choice of venue was not difficult because in Ferndale there is a nice, refurbished Chapel that is owned by a male voice choir. It is far more airy and warm than some of the practise halls that I have had the pleasure of learning in. The next thing to consider was recruitment. Our first promotional talk, at the local Women's Institute, was an unlikely setting for gathering students for martial art training. So we turned up with a power point presentation and crib notes. We delivered our spiel and received a surprisingly positive response from the group. So, although people from other walks of life have subsequently joined the group the original W.I. influence means that the class does stop for a halfway break of tea and more often than not home baked cakes. This venture began in March 2017.

Matters ticked over nicely for some time but as we all know, “the only constant in the universe is change”. Mark, our Sifu, for reasons not connected to tai chi, upped and moved to London. It was something of a blow to lose that weekly teaching, but I determined to keep what Mark had developed going. I inherited his class and Laurence co-taught with me in Ferndale. I was also asked to take over a class based in a Gym in Merthyr. Life became quite busy. Then Covid arrived and life became very much less busy.

When it was apparent that the virus was spreading, I stopped classes even before we were required to. Initially, I made some short clips on the form and chi gung for students to pick up from Whatsapp and the Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan

South Wales Facebook page. As time dragged on, inertia set in and I did less than I would have liked for the students. One positive spinoff from the Corona chaos is that online learning has taken off in a real (and I suspect continuing) way. I am now receiving individual training again from Sifu Mark, which in turn will benefit the students when we are able to meet freely again. This is where I am today. This is a brief resume of an 11-year journey. The questions that arise are, what have I learned so far, what do I need to learn and what is the future for Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan in the South East area of Wales?

There is the obvious learning one might expect in a tai chi environment i.e. the form in various incarnations the 108, the round 54, push hands, applications and a bit of chin na and so on. There is however learning that is specific to the individual. You and I may be being taught by the same Sifu but what we take in and how we respond is likely to be different.

In the course of my journey, I have met the Grandmaster Wu Kwong Yu, 5th generation gatekeeper of Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan, on 2 occasions, as well as a number of his senior disciples. The depth of teaching encountered has convinced me that Wu Style Tai Chi is the one for me and that I will not need to go looking elsewhere for instruction.

Conversely by being trained as a competition judge I have come to respect the value inherent in different styles of tai chi. The main styles have common foundations and the principles of the tai chi classics are evident in them. Mind you, I have seen some pretty wild stuff billed as tai chi as well. When that happens, I take the advice of Grandmaster Wu to heart “Just smile and walk away”.

I have learned not to try to be clever as a teacher. If I don't know something, I tell the class so and I try to find out for them. I believe it is helpful for students to realize that the teacher is a student too. If I make a mistake and the

class laughs, I laugh as well. People learn if they are enjoying themselves. Leave your ego at the training hall door.

It has become apparent that there is no end to the depth of the chuan, the sabre, the sword, and so on. When the structure is learned then refinement begins and continues for a lifetime. Whilst this may feel somewhat overwhelming for someone new to tai chi, I take comfort in the fact that there is always more to learn.

In learning the form, we are all different and have our own strengths and weaknesses. I believe that I am reflective and can work diligently on developing and refining skills. I am convinced however that I have invisible elastic bands connecting my shoulders to my ears. Keeping my shoulders relaxed is a challenge. It's fine on stuff I am familiar with but when Sifu Mark is teaching me something new or refining something I am familiar with I hear “oh and while you are doing that, drop the shoulders”. I think that is helpful to be honest with ourselves as to what we do well and what we need to spend more time on.

The focus for future learning for me is to refine the Chuan. The next goal is to reach a level of competence to teach at intermediate level.

To say that Covid has interfered with the development of classes in South Wales is a complete understatement. This I am sure is true across the globe. As things stand the Ferndale hall has systems in place and has been approved for Tai chi to re-start. The downside to this is that the social distancing measures mean that only 5 students can safely train there. When some semblance of normality returns the plan initially is to keep the classes in one venue and to build numbers in that setting. Although classes have taken place infrequently, the contact I do have with students reassures me that we will be up and running as soon as is practical: the commitment is there.

