

Journey to the park

Mark Peters' tai chi journey started one summer lying on a sun lounger, drinking Buck's Fizz and flicking through a night school booklet. He had dabbled with a few tai chi classes but nothing really met the quality and depth he was looking for...

After a bit of research I found Nigel Sutton who taught a hsing-i (xing yi), bagua and tai chi course in Manchester. On arriving Nigel's assistant John Higginson took us for a run in the park followed by some tai chi practise. My first tai chi in the park and I was hooked.

Manchester to Malaysia

I continued to train with John on a monthly basis, as it's an hour and half drive each way from my home in Birmingham. In 1991, Nigel Sutton invited a small group of us to train in Malaysia and Singapore. At the same time I became a 'closed door' student (bai-shi) which opened up training beyond regular classes. I went each year for about three weeks and am so thankful my soon-to-be-wife was so understanding. We trained hard, up to ten hours a day, starting around 5am through the afternoon and evening into the night. I trained with master Wu Chiang Hsing for tai chi and qigong, including one-to-one. I took part in his 5am qigong classes in a local park. He would arrive to collect me, in his Proton car with the aircon on 14°C which was quite a shock in the 30+°C heat. I set up his huge cassette player and attached it to a car battery. As the music started, students would start to appear as if from the bushes. He would teach for a few hours working through various qigong sets, tai chi forms and weapons. This was my first training in the shibashi set as master Wu had trained with prof. Lin Housheng.

Another 5am tai chi in the park was with master Liang He Qing. He actually arrived at 3am but kept that time for his personal training. From him I learnt kwai taiji, swimming dragon qigong, original 13 qigong and much more. Even when he came to the UK, and stayed at our home in Birmingham, he still insisted on training in the early morning outdoors.

With master Tan Seow Theng we would meet to train in Fujian yongchun wuzuquan and qigong at a local park and children's playground. Master Tan would stand on a concrete post and teach xiang-gong (fragrant Buddha qigong).

Taiwan beckoned

My teacher, grand-master Tan Ching Ngee (Singapore), once contacted me in England and asked me to accompany him to Taiwan. Not only couldn't I say no – as he was my teacher – but Taiwan was the home of prof. Cheng Man'ching so it was an opportunity not to be missed.

Grand-master Tan introduced me to many of prof.



Mark Peters: tai chi rain or shine

Cheng's seniors. When he introduced me to William CC Chen he was surprised to find we already knew each other. The private classes were amazing but my fondest memories are of training in Chiang Kai-Shek Park.

The bug for the great outdoors

Back in the UK I yearned for training in the great outdoors, and regularly practised in a park near my home in Bournville. I was once stopped by an off duty policeman for wielding a dangerous weapon. I was actually practising with a telescopic straight-sword (jien). He was fascinated to find out more and let me off with a warning. Over the years I continued to practise in local parks for my own training, but kept classes indoors. In this video, the weather made it quite dramatic.

www.youtu.be/tpGergZ3sc0
In around 2000 I became involved with 'world tai chi day' which aimed to connect practitioners worldwide with public events. My largest event was in 2008 which was held as part of the climate change festival in Birmingham city centre. We had over 100 people taking part and it can be seen on YouTube at www.youtu.be/nP25TZiqOfE

Coming home to Cotteridge

There are festivals all over the country and a growing one, local to me, is CoCoMAD which stands for Cotteridge Community Festival of Music, Art and Dance. In 2010 I asked if they'd like some tai chi. The next thing I know I was up on stage rallying the crowd to join in. I thought it would be a little class in the orchard, but hey-ho.

There was such a lot of interest that, working with the Friends of Cotteridge Park (FOCP) we started a weekly Thursday morning class at 10.30am (not so many people keen on a 5am start in Birmingham).

FoCP believe that access to physical activity sessions should not be limited to those that can afford them so we worked with them to raise grant funding so the classes could be free.

As the weekly classes developed, I would introduce them to tai chi walking stick form using NHS walking sticks as a number of those attending already used one. We practised a mix of qigong, tai chi form and mindfulness, with the occasional martial application thrown in for good measure.

The key elements of these park sessions that led to their success were:

- Free at the point of delivery – cost was not a barrier to trying something new
- Local – in familiar parks and open spaces so that going somewhere new was not a barrier
- Designed to be suitable for 'permanent beginners' – the classes repeated the basic elements of practice and

form over and over again. This meant that new people could join the class at any time and not feel too far behind

- If people wanted to progress they were signposted to other classes

- Welcoming – meet and greet and a cup of tea at the end with chat are as important as the exercise

Birmingham City Council (BCC) heard about the class and wanted to expand the idea, using these principles.

BCC's Wellbeing team worked with Birmingham open spaces forum (BOSF) to co-produce Active Parks.

BOSF is the network organisation of volunteer groups that look after the city's parks and open spaces – of which Friends of Cotteridge Park is a member.

Active Parks added sessions of Zumba, park fit, walking groups, cycling and dance to the original tai chi classes.

In the pilot year of 2013 there were 25 activities over six parks. By 2014 there were 39 activities in approx. 50 parks across Birmingham, with tai chi available in at least 10 of them.

At this point the project came to the notice of Coca Cola and their ParkLives programme. With funding from them the project expanded to cover over 80 sites with 50,000 participants in the following years.

This video shows what a great mix of people took part in the different activities. www.youtu.be/LbteoOaQHhk

Coca-Cola formed ParkLives in 2014 and after seeing what we were doing (2015/6), offered to sponsor us through to 2020. We just had to wear branded clothing. The funding enabled us to start tracking data better, buy equipment if needed, and connect up more groups across the UK.

Visitors from councils across the UK and from different countries came to see how the project worked with a view to replicating the success elsewhere.

To help connect more people, I opened a Facebook group 'Tai Chi in the Park' which now has over 800 members sharing details of their tai chi and qigong in the park sessions. We were also featured on Birmingham Live TV, a clip of which can be seen on YouTube.

The impact of Covid through 2020-21

We were going from strength to strength, giving presentations at the Move Congress in 2017 and the CLOA conference in 2019. Then 2020 hit and Covid stopped everything for everyone. All classes closed and the world locked down.

I continued to offer sessions for free on Facebook live, some of which I uploaded to YouTube. When lockdown eased later on in 2020 we were able to return to tai chi in the park for a short while with a maximum group size of



30 people. It was wonderful for both physical and mental health to get outdoors and exercise again. Human interaction is a powerful thing. Unfortunately, the UK had to lockdown again, and I went back online.

March 29th 2021 was the date in England to be able to return to outdoor classes (Scotland 12th March, Wales 15th March, Ireland 5th April). The Tai Chi & Qigong Union for Great Britain started a page on Facebook to keep people informed of the requirements as well as a specific Covid page.

The Coca-Cola funding ran out at the end of 2020 and the pandemic meant that the planned search for co-production funding didn't happen.

But there was so much interest in continuing sessions, particularly as the safest activities are outdoors, that BOSF took the project on and worked to identify funding that local communities could apply to keep the tai chi in the parks going.

In 2021, 11 groups have successfully applied for grants from the Neighbourhood Network Schemes, Sport Birmingham and Sport England. By June 2021 we had opened 11 classes with many more planned.

Weather never stops people attending. Somebody even gave me a hat umbrella so no excuses.

Working with BOSF and the 'friends of' groups has really pulled the community together. *Tai Chi in the Park* can only go from strength to strength. It has brought people together before and during the Covid pandemic. I'm sure it will continue long after.

Health practitioners from primary to tertiary care in both physical and mental health, refer patients and staff to Tai Chi in the Park. It serves to increase public awareness of tai chi and qigong. Long may it flourish. 🌱

Video links

Facebook group 'Tai Chi in the Park'
www.facebook.com/groups/parktaichi
Clip from Birmingham Live TV www.youtu.be/KBW7fuZ13pE
Free on Facebook sessions on YouTube
www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwefce31dNALO9LEyxtXE2CQp_nzdjsu4b
The Tai Chi & Qigong Union for Great Britain Facebook page
www.facebook.com/TCUGBHealthCommittee-103961201747938
And Covid page www.taichiunion.com/coronavirus-covid-19
Tai chi in the park
www.paintingtherainbow.co.uk/park-tai-chi-classes.php

The author, Mark Peters, lives and teaches tai chi and qigong in Birmingham. Mark is chairman of the Tai Chi & Qigong Union for Great Britain. www.kaiming.co.uk www.paintingtherainbow.co.uk