

Recontres Jasnieres 22nd Edition

Marcon, France 24 - 26 July 2009

Chateau du Loir



Travelling with Bob

It had been a year or two since I last travelled to France to attend [Recontres Jasnieres](#) in the company of my old friend [Bob Lowey](#) and this trip already got off to a better start with us actually getting the Easyjet flight to Stanstead in good time. (Some years before we screwed up on the time and incurred extra costs to get there). Bob had attended RJ on many, many occasions over a period of nearly 20 years and was considered to be a stalwart of the event.

Settling In

Mid-afternoon saw us in Tours where we picked up the hire car and, with the aid of our SatNav we arrived at the campsite in less than an hour. Because in recent years we found this route to France infinitely more bearable than

the horrendous drive from Glasgow we relied on the goodwill of friends to bring our accommodation, a tent of some description. [Judith van Drooge](#), who after teaching at this year's [Tai Chi Caledonia](#), had stayed in my house with her family and friends whilst I was teaching at the [Taijiquan & Qigong Federation for Europe's](#) (TCFE) Congress/ Forum in Bulgaria, had kindly agreed to bring a tent for me whilst Bob was being cared for by Monique from Lille, France. Two days prior to my departure I realised that Judith would not get there until a day after me so I went in search of alternative accommodation. After some research I decided the best course of action was to hire one of the full-fitted 'bungalow' tents which I could co-hire with Judith's family and friends. This meant I would enjoy previously

unknown luxury accommodation instead of trying to settle on the hard ground.

Welcome Barbeque

Once Bob was settled in at his place he informed me that Monique and his array of students from France and Scotland were to arrange a barbeque that evening and that we should join them. A short drive to Le Clerc allowed us to stock up on basic essentials: water, wine, fresh fruit etc. On returning to camp it looked somewhat overcast so I suggested they move the barbeque to my bungalow tent which offered some protection from the elements. Martin subsequently transported his burning barbeque some 100 metres or so in true kung fu style. Shortly afterwards the heavens opened as we happily enjoyed sausages, wine and salad. [Paul Silverstrale](#), from

Elise & Bob



Sweden, who also taught at this year's [Caledonia](#), also joined us and as he was a fellow Committee member from the [TCFE](#) we had much to discuss following my trip to Bulgaria.

Push Hands & Meditation

The event of Recontres Jasnières takes place over four days, Thursday – Sunday, always on the last weekend in July. Teachers have the opportunity of offering seminars around the times of the formal event which can be pre-advertised in their programme. I offered a workshop on the theme of Push Hands & Meditation and aside from putting up a few posters around the campsite I had no indication who, if anybody would attend.

Dutch Courage

As five people attended in the morning and seven in the afternoon I guess I could say there were six students in total. Roderick I had met on a number of occasions and he was also helping to co-organise the [1st Dutch Push Hands Meeting](#), later in August this year. Else, a woman of considerable experience, I had also met a few times in RJ and it is always interesting to spend time pushing with her. Two other Dutchmen, Bill and Ince (?) also joined us along with Elizabet, coincidentally also from Holland. Bill and Ince were two very strong guys who, I guess, were prepared to try a new approach, given my title of 'Push Hands & Meditation.'

The Workshop

I began the session by inviting them to simply stand opposite their partner in the classic position for the exercise of push hands. I asked them to close their eyes and be still for a moment or two. I then led them to consider how it felt to be standing in that place at that time; "feel your feet, feel your connection to the earth, feel the air around you,

listen to the sounds of the soft breeze through the trees, hear the noises in the distance..... and then try to listen to your breath, feel where it is in your body, what parts of your body move as a result of our breathing...."

After some time I asked them to open their eyes and get a sense of how the visual information can shift your perception a little. I asked them to observe the person standing opposite them, think about their stance, their posture, how it feels to have this person standing opposite you, just about to make contact to engage in the process of tui shou. Slowly, after some time, I eventually allowed them to make contact. I asked them to consider the quality of touch, they were feeling, consider if they felt more active or passive at this point; think about who was initiating and who was reacting and which of these two possible positions did they favour, and why.....

In working in this way, paying real close attention to the various processes we go through when pushing hands, I believe allows us insights that may not necessarily be possible without this meditative approach. Later when I encouraged them to gradually, step by step, become more deliberate in their intentions, more structured, upright and present, not only within themselves, but also in relationship to their position opposite a partner, different aspects were possible. I feel that the real work of push hands begins from inside ourselves; it is who we are, and what our hopes and intentions are that colour our behaviour in relationship to our work with others.

Strong Problems

During the course of our work I became aware that the two strong Dutch guys were having some difficulties in moving with continued soft contact, particularly when under pressure. I agreed that this was one of the most difficult places in tui shou and that being strong; one's natural defensive instincts would automatically kick in. I suggested that they perhaps had a harder job to relinquish, or at least moderately decrease, their inherent, inbuilt response to stressful situations, particularly in push hands. Only by working with a cooperative partner, who allows them to try to use less force, whilst still offering a degree of pressure that is both acceptable and creative for both parties. Working in this way enables the potential of finding more relaxed, effective responses to difficult situations.

Continuing to Experiment

In the afternoon we were joined

Paul & Christof



by [Anneke van der Loos](#) who I had previously met at Tai Chi Caledonia in 2008. Anneke was also a woman of considerable experience, having spent much time in the company of [Wee Kee Kin](#) who specialised in the work or [Huang Sheng Shyan](#). Also joining us was an elderly Italian gentleman from Milan. (I'm sorry his name escapes me) Although in his later years he displayed considerable strength, coupled with real sensitivity – a rare but worthy combination. What struck me most about these two people was the fact that, though both being 60+ they were not only keen aficionados of tui shou, but also more than willing to continue experimenting with different approaches to increase their learning. Both parties were solid in their stances yet fluid and open in their approach to the work.

Friends

Later that evening Judith arrived with her family and friends and following another excursion to Le Clerc we all shared a very pleasant dinner together, again accompanied by some more than reasonable wines along with good friends Paul Silfverstrale and [Nils Klug](#) along with his girlfriend Astrid.



Da Lui Workshop

Da Lui

On the first day of the official programme I was teaching Da Lui, a 2-person routine which includes the basic elements of taiji. My approach is to work initially, with little verbal input, to create the groundwork of the basic movements which consist of only 8 steps. Working slowly, building up piece by piece, a move at a time I feel allows students to get a general sense of the shape and form whilst paying attention to aspects like balance, grounding and, eventually, fluidity of movement. Once the basic sequence was roughly in place we then worked on looking closer at the structure, solidity and relaxation within the individual movements, allowing students to 'test' their partner in a safe, helpful way by gently push towards their centre and encouraging them to 'ground' whilst remaining stable and relaxed.

Neutralisation, not Force

Once students were acquainted with the movements, and had become more stable in their stances, we worked on the applications of the individual sequences. Like in tui shou it became immediately apparent when the technique was not in place: when the student feels something is wrong their basic instinctive response

is to apply a degree of force to execute the application. It's not a case of whether someone is using too much force in an application, which is, as we all know, an ongoing issue in these matters, if the technique is really in place then there is no need to force things at all. In the 'Pull Down' for example if the body is in the wrong position there will be an almost involuntary action of either pulling, grasping or pushing the opponent out of harm's way. Simply by turning the waist, at the appropriate time, a few degrees more neutralised the oncoming force of the shoulder-stroke, negating any need to interfere with the process of the oncoming attack.

Over the course of the 1 ½ hours we covered the basic sequence and investigated where we needed to make changes to increase our effectiveness in the art, with a few basic techniques. Whilst it is interesting and stimulating to learn different forms and aspects of taiji they all come down to the basic elements and regular training of these aspects with an open enquiring mind always pays dividends.

Making Choices

On the 2nd day I made my way to the meeting place to begin teaching again. The format of RJ offers a range of 1 ½ hour workshops on various aspects of Chinese internal arts. Instructors submit their proposals and the organisers try to create a programme that they feel is of interest to the participants. The event has been running for over 20 years and continues to attract large numbers being the largest such gathering in Europe and the inspiration for many others including Tai Chi Caledonia. What remains different about RJ is that there is no pre-booking for particular workshops, students just turn up each day and make their choices. This being the case it could feel like a marketplace as crowds of people make the walk along the path, gradually gathering at whatever space includes the topic they want to work on. Teachers stand there with their name displayed on a bright yellow card waiting to see who's going to join them for the class. I was situated between Bob Lowey and Paul Silfverstrale, a little distance from Nils Klug. There was a choice of 9 seminars running concurrently. Bob, who was teaching Medical Qigong had around 40 people, I had 17 for my Qigong and Meditation and Paul had only 3 for his push hands principles. Paul is a highly experienced practitioner with more than competent skills on push hands. Given that RJ offers 3 hours of push hands each afternoon I was quite shocked at the low numbers. On looking again at the programme I realised that [Serge Dreyer](#), the organiser of the event



was offering push hands for beginners whilst Nils was covering push hands and applications, perhaps a case of questionable scheduling?

Qigong & Meditation

After basic introductions, I began my session with some [Yijinjing](#) exercises, with minimal verbal input other than instructions on breathing and relaxing into the stretches. Gradually I encouraged them to feel the connection to the ground, the stretching up to the heavens, and the feel of the air around them, whilst paying attention, internally, to their breathing. After 20-30 minutes of work we sat down silently with our eyes closed whilst I invited them to get a sense of how they felt after the work, really tuning into their bodies and minds. This was followed by each student saying just a few words about how it was for them. For me creating this quiet space where students can first really consider the effect of the work, on a deep level, followed by expressing how they feel helps to both consolidate and validate what one can get from this work. When others express similar sentiments (as is always the case) it helps to reinforce the work field. I talked a little about the importance of really feeling what goes on with the work and how increasing self-awareness is an important part of our work.

Spontaneous Qigong

We then continued with a looser, freer approach to qigong using movements from the [Taiji Qigong 18](#) Section as a tool for starting, beginning with 'Lift Hands', moving through to 'Opening the Chest' and gradually increasing our range of movements, alternating between soft, opening sequences to raising the energy, stretching the body, opening the back, the waist and stretching the legs to provide a complete body workout. Many of the movements were improvised

Judith, family & friends, Astrid & Nils Klug at the local fair



whilst encouraging students to really feel what their bodies needed at that time. At the end of the session everyone felt exhilarated.

Pushing Hands

The main focus of RJ is having the facility of pushing for 3 hours each afternoon with a choice of somewhere between 2-300 potential partners, this being the case all manner of things are possible. Fortunately this year, all encounters, for me, were very pleasant. Often I felt challenged, sometimes in a very soft, subtle way and sometimes in a very quick vigorous manner but always with the very best of spirit. Working with strangers brought new, often unexpected results whilst working with friends and acquaintances was always an informative, interesting experience. Paul Silfverstrale is strong and able but always applies principles and an overriding sense of good spirit, Else is subtle, encounters I often found myself working with individuals, of considerable experience, who seemed intent of trying to keep me out. Whilst this is often effective, especially when someone is strong, I do believe it can seriously inhibit their growth. By 'investing in loss' or at least experimenting with trying to entice the opponent in, with the potential that they over-reach thereby increasing their ability to neutralise, we can perhaps increase our taiji abilities in respect of yielding, absorbing and ultimately using the opponent's energy to our advantage. Again many

of the practices reflected my earlier experiences on the first day during my 'Push Hands & Meditation' workshop.

Saturday Night

It is customary on Saturday evening to attend the dancing party that is organised by RJ and eventually we found our way there. Prior to that, after dinner, we went into the village or Marcon where they were celebrating their annual holiday with a local market which included food and local produce stalls selling local sausages, seafood and other such delicacies together with wines from the region. It seemed to me that, like me, most of the taiji people enjoyed this part of the evening, perhaps finding it more preferable to the dancing party. It provided a nice social context which also enabled us to experience something of the local culture. Perhaps the organisers of RJ could consider staging a fun push hands contest as part of the local festivities to bring the two events together.

The Last Day

Sunday morning saw me teaching tui shou again where we worked with the themes of being present in the moment and creating extra space through increased opening or expanding upwards and outwards rather than moving away immediately from the push. It seems that often the intentions of others can take precedent in tui shou and we can become prone to continually trying to defend our space and fight against the

oncoming push. Often I'd see people physically turning their heads away in the direction of where they were being pushed. When this happens they have to do everything they can to stop from being pushed over. If they stand facing their partner and try to let any oncoming push be naturally and spontaneously neutralised then the partner's intention will naturally decrease, making it easier to deal with their force. It's very much a case of the predominant pusher being allowed to dictate the rules of play. If you don't acknowledge what's happening then it's harder for them to continue their attack. Try to not be where you are pushed and be more present in contact to them with your pushing hand.

In the afternoon, by way of a change, Judith van Drooge and I did a Da Lui demonstration. Despite our continued run-throughs where Judith paid great attention to detail, I essentially just winged it and didn't stick to script. That being said I think the end result was more spontaneous and natural allowing us to really practice the techniques rather than just put on a show.

Recontres Jasnieres was a real pleasure for me this year, and I know for many of my friends and colleagues. I assume that all the others had a good time and I continue to do all I can to recommend the event to all taiji players.