

AquaVenice Tai Chi 2007

An Italian Excursion - by Ronnie Robinson



At the poster for the event

The 1st weekend in August took me, at the behest of Franco Mescola (www.taichi.it), to the exotic location of Venice to be one of the 4 instructors invited to teach at his 1st international event on the island of St Erasmo, 45 mins boat ride from central Venice. The others were Marianne Plouvier (France), Sue Woodd (UK) and Gianni Groppelli (Switzerland).

My dear Italian friend Luigi Zanini advised me to fly to Milano Bergamo (one of Ryanairs many outposts) and I arrived at 12.30am. Antonio, my trusty driver awaited my arrival and cruised me down the Italian motorway for some 3+ hours. Conversation was stilted because of the language problem but we soon found a common theme when a Leonard Cohen live album was slipped into the CD player. Around 3.30am we finally found the hotel after a tired stroll via the canals of central Venice. On the way we saw a large format poster advertising the event and it was amusing to see my name next to a poster of a Venice art exhibition.

The next morning we had a light (make that virtually non-existent) Italian breakfast of a few sweet biscuits and a strong black coffee. At least it woke me up so I was a little fresher by the time we met Franco in his local park with a

few students. I've visited Venice a few times before but didn't expect to see a nice little park suitable for training in the shade of a few ancient willows.

After a few formalities we made our way to Franco's little boat for the onward voyage to the island. Cruising through the canals with a local provided a very different perspective of this fascinating city. Franco was a native and knew the place very well indeed. Later he kindly gave me a booklet of sketches and fantasy writings he made about his hometown, which further enhanced the

sense of legend that pervades Venice.

45 minutes later we arrived at the island and took a 10 minute stroll from the harbour to the centre where the course was held. The three storey building was painted a soft yellow and nestled beneath trees and was surrounded by grape vines and olive groves. There were apple and pear trees, tomato vines and fresh vegetables growing all around us. To the side there was a chicken coop where fresh eggs could be had every day.

After settling into a cooled, comfortable room we met outside for the 1st workshop of the day. All of the students were from the various schools around Italy that Franco has built up and all were formally attired in clean white training wear. The core of Franco's work centres around coiling and circling. We started with big circles and moved to circles within circles. These exercises provided the basis for a number of applications which we progressed to. Franco's teaching was clear, patient and well demonstrated. The 40-50 students worked well and despite the language difficulties I enjoyed the sessions.

After a 15 minute break we gathered under the trees once more to work with Gianni Groppelli, from Switzerland. He



Boating through the canals



The centre at St Erasamo

talked a lot, in Italian of course which proved taxing for my translator so I asked her just to leave it as I found it easier just to watch what he was doing. With the help of a strong student he demonstrated centring and grounding techniques very well but the other students wanted to experience a lot more of it for themselves. His ability was evident and the students knew that they would need to spend a lot of time working through the exercises to get close to what was being demonstrated.

After a substantial seafood lunch at the local beach cafe, and a much needed siesta I was ready to go for my afternoon session. I was teaching push hands and, being unfamiliar with their approach, I started with a few basic loosening exercises. Once they were loosened up I asked them to do a little free-pushing to get a sense of where they were.

There group was varied in terms of experience with a few strong guys and some a little more delicate. I worked on maintaining alignment rather than leaning back away from a push and then progressed to let them experience how far they felt comfortable in yielding. The difference between leaning backwards and trying to stay upright to absorb and ground a push is an approach that I always find to be informative, allowing students to feel what is possible by making a few structural amendments. I gave them an exercise to push their partner continuously, but gradually on the middle of the chest and went around making adjustments to illustrate how much of a push they were able to absorb with these changes in place. In doing this exercise another problem came up; the tendency to allow the mind to go where they are being pushed rather than staying more present with their intention. Often when one is pushed, the mind is taken away with what is happening to them, even to the point of the head turning backwards as the push puts them on the back leg and their body begins to turn away. I like to try to re-train the reflexes to let go as and when the push comes, let go to the point that the body yields but the mind stays connected to the opponent's body. By staying with this connection the person pushing begins to feel the push towards them and then, possibly, or even probably, they lessen their push towards you, allowing you time to yield out of it and continue with the push towards their centre. There is much to be gained by really staying present to the



free-pushing



Franco Mescola



by the harbour

connection with the other, rather than getting taken away by their connection to you. When pushed we should try to really develop a sense of not being there whilst remaining very much connected to the other person's centre. The more we allow them to take control of us, both in our minds and bodies, the less chance we have of neutralising their push. For me this is why it is really important to invest time in loosening exercises to increase the possibility of automatically yielding or letting go to a push, to develop a sense of not being there when pushed, but being very much present when connected to them. A good exercise to train this is for both partners to stand in the push hands stance, each with a hand on the centre of the other's chest, and then try to establish which connection you feel the most, your connection to them or their connection to you. By staying relaxed, aware and focussed you can establish where your mind goes when pushed and where your partner's goes when your connection is stronger than theirs.

Most of the students found this exercise

to be helpful but, as is always the case, a few just continued to do what they always did. I noticed some of the stronger guys using a considerable amount of force or using their arms to push a push away from their centre. No doubt these approaches have a particular amount of success, particularly when against a weaker opponent, whether physically or mentally, but so much more can be gained by giving up on what I refer to as their 'insurance policy' - that is when all else fails, resort to resistance or pushing away. For me it is so much more helpful to invest in allowing the opponent to push as much as he/she wants to whilst really trying to neutralise or let go to the push. Of course it's not always successful and sometimes our ego can kick in creating the need to use other defensive tactics, but if we can allow the defence to be totally connected to the push, without resisting or redirecting then their is a strong possibility of our opponent coming out of their centre by over-reaching, particularly when using too much force.

After a tasty evening meal a few of us adjourned once again to the beach cafe for a few wines. The students were good company and soon got rid of my previous concerns regarding attending an event which was working solely with one teacher's school, particularly given the formality that seems to be prevalent in Italian tai chi schools. I've met a number of Italian teachers over the years and often found them to be guarded and protective of their schools. When this happens there is less opportunity to engage on a social level with students. The warm Venitian evening and a few glasses of good wine soon had us all chatting and laughing, particularly with the Naples contingency.

The next morning a few rose for qigong as the sun was rising but 6.00am is not my best time so under the blankets for me until 8ish.

By the time I surfaced Franco had boated everyone to a smaller island where they practiced their sensitivity through walking exercises on the soft sea sands. From the beach-side bar, over a good coffee, I could see the crowd in white some inaccessible distance away. Once fortified I borrowed a bike and had a little tour of the island. The sun was hot but the sea breeze was cooling as I cycled around the farm fields and small harbour areas. The pace was slow and life looked good for these people; sun, healthy fresh, tasty food, no traffic or sense of haste - a perfect place to be.

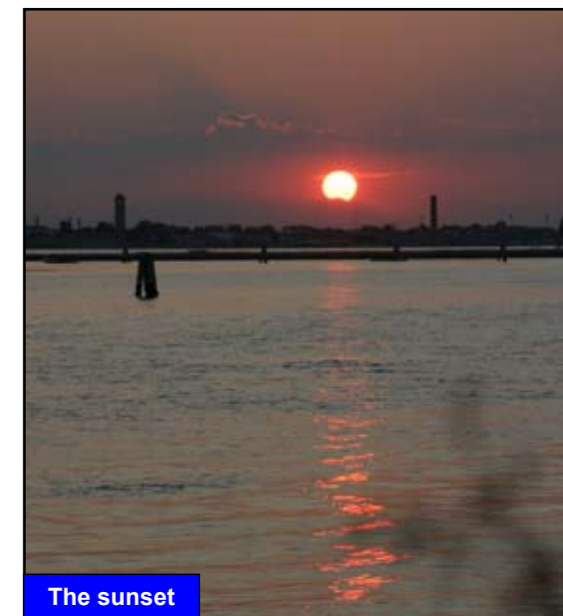
An hour or two later I joined the others for another seafood lunch and cold beer.

More push hands, this time working more directly on intention and focus with a few clearly defined routines to emphasise being connected and direct when pushing. Again the strong guys got stronger and the weaker struggled a little. I then split the group in order of experience to allow me to work more appropriately to the needs of the individuals. It is no good having a strong, forceful guy pushing intently to a smaller less experienced woman without clear rules of engagement and a mutual understanding of what each person hopes to gain from the experience. It is always important to be aware that we are all there to learn something, something about our approach to the work, both physically and mentally.

Later that evening I approached Gianni, through a translator and told them that I



teaching structure



The sunset



push hands



demonstration in the garden

felt we seemed to have similar aims with our intentions to push hands. He agreed and said that he would like to push with me. I agreed to meet him the next day for a quiet encounter, away from the others to explore what we had.

The next morning once Franco's workshop was underway I beckoned Gianni to join me at the other side of the building. Our initial contact was soft as we felt each other out and I detected a little initial resistance. As I got nearer his centre. When this happened I eased off a little and he gradually got softer. The exchange was very pleasant and informative for each of us. After some 20 - 30 minutes he told me that they way we worked together brought out the real essence of what he liked about push hands and suggested we demonstrate to the students. I agreed but jokingly suggested that we should appear to be angry with each other first, knowing that a number of students knew we were training together, and were more than keen to see what was happening between us. He laughed and agreed. When we returned Franco was just finished and we suggested we would demonstrate how we pushed together. Much to my surprise Gianni pushed in hard, following with a sweep to bring me down. I stumbled, fell back a little, parried a kick and re-engaged. Then we became softer and moved sensitively to the other's pushes whilst rooting and re-connecting to continue. The students appreciated the sensitivity of the work and complemented us on this approach.



competing on water



Venice

Later I spent a further 20 minutes or so pushing with Franco, again in a quiet place.

After lunch we went to the beach for a push-hands competition with a difference. Two wooden boards were tied to a surf-board and contestants stood on them to compete. Rooting abilities were tested as the tide moved the boards and much fun was had by all.

My time in Venice was very pleasant indeed, much more than I hoped for. Franco was very open with his hope to help to develop his student's skills further and they all worked very hard each day, training in sword, sabre, spear, form, applications, qigong and, of course tui shou.

The earlier part of the event, referred to as the Yin Phase included Marianne Plouvier from France, teaching Budadjin and Sue Woodd from the UK teaching Dragon Qigong. As it coincided with Recontres Jasnieres 20th Anniversary I was unable to join them but Sue stayed on for the 2nd weekend and had also very good feelings about the gathering.

To be able to work on a lovely island, to

work with people from other countries and traditions, who are open and willing to learn is rewarding in itself. Coupled with that there was plenty time to take it easy and enjoy the warm weather, eat beautifully prepared local produce, also in a very nice restaurant, in very good company. The students were very helpful, particularly with translations and many were very pleased with the work we did.

After another delicious meal, until around 4.00pm, we finally said our goodbyes and Franco once more took us on the 45 boat journey back to central Venice. It would have been nice to explore the city some more but with the thronging summer tourist season in full swing it wasn't a good time.

My good friend Luigi Zanini met me at the boat station and drove me back to his home in Vincenza, around an hour drive away. I spent a lovely afternoon and evening with him and his wife Laura with a nice after dinner walk in the countryside in search of some wonderful, hand-made organic ice cream.

The next day Luigi and I enjoyed a bicycle ride round his local countryside before heading back to the airport for my final journey home.

Teaching tai chi for a living doesn't necessarily bring much in the way of financial rewards but journeys like this Italian adventure are enriching in so many other ways.



pushing with Gianni