

Aquavenice 2008

Espresso or latte? by Ronnie Robinson

Sue Woodd, Marianne Plouvier & Ronnie Robinson



Having been busy early July organising the 13th Tai Chi Caledonia, and then travelling to France for the 21st Recontres Jasnieres, which involved camping for nearly a week, I looked forward to relaxing in a comfortable bed for my second visit to Aquavenice.

In early August 2008 I travelled once again to Venice, Italy as a guest of Franco Mescola for his annual event. After arriving in Venice I we travelled on the local boat taxi to the nearby island of St Erasmo and then a 15 minute walk to the centre where the event was being staged.



Aquavenice runs over two long weekends, one 'Yin' and one 'Yang' focussing primarily on qigong and tuishou/applications. Because of other commitments I have yet to attend the Yin period but I was intending to allow the sun and sea to mellow me towards my yinner tendencies.

Aside from allowing in-depth training with their master, the event offers Franco's students an opportunity to experience other approaches to the art, with other instructors: Sue Woodd (UK), Gianni Grappelli (Switzerland), Marianne Plouvier (France), of course, me.

Franco and Sue I had just left a couple of weeks previous, as teachers at Tai Chi Caledonia, Gianni taught at Aquavenice last year, but I hadn't seen Marianne for some years. Having spent some time over a number of years working with Marianne in

our various roles of the Taijiquan & Qigong Federation for Europe it was delightful to spend time in her company once more., particularly in these relaxing, pressure-free surroundings.

St Erasmo itself is a beautiful island with good food, lovely weather and excellent beaches. Aquavenice offers a comprehensive training programme which, for any practitioner of tai chi or chi kung.

We worked outdoors in the shade of olive trees with a pleasant cooling breeze drifting through.

Marianne spent some hours teaching an interesting San Shou routine which the students took to well. Her teaching, as always, was clear, concise and easy for them to stay with. Franco worked on spiralling routines whilst Gianni and I concentrated on tui shou and applications.



The event allowed flexibility for students to come and go at different times over the course of the two weeks, which meant there was something between 60 - 80 students there at any time.

Because of the size of the groups two teachers taught together, one with half the group and the other with the other half, changing groups after approximately 1 hour 30 minutes. This gave the students two different approaches to the same theme and seemed to work well.

As is the norm in pushing hands groups there is a considerable difference in experience and ability but what became evident for me was that, despite the experience level, similar themes were occurring with all students.

Problems can be solutions. During pushing hands, whether when training or during free-pushing sessions difficulties occur when under pressure. Under pressure means that we are

getting pushed to our limits, both figuratively and literally. When this happens our gut instincts kick in - we either freeze up or try to push the oncoming force away. It happens to almost everyone and it happens without even thinking about it. However, if we really pay attention to how things really are, how we are feeling, and how we react when under pressure, then we can often find a way out of difficult situations. By identifying our weaknesses we can get closer to finding our strengths. Try to find the space to tune into these blocks and then you can work towards releasing them.

Think basic

We are all aware of the basic principles of the art and with tui shou there are two basic choices to make: yang to yin, yin to yang. When we are being pushed, we should consider the force to be yang, (which it is) and meet it with yin. So if you are tempted into pushing the other push away think about it for a moment and

try to find a way to accept it, let it come to you, and ultimately through you. Invite your partner in and allow them to gradually over-extend thereby pushing themselves out. This, for me is the basic principles we should apply to the art of pushing hands. All very well I hear you say but how can this be applied under pressure, particularly when I am working with someone who is really strong and forceful? Well providing we find the right terms of engagement then we can work towards having a creative, educational outcome.

Cooperation

One of the most inhibiting aspects of the work of push hands is being faced with a partner who is strong, deliberate and forceful. Ideally we should be able to copy with whatever comes to us but, hey we need some space and time to train these aspects, to allow us to learn to re-train our natural, instinctive responses, which more often than not is either to resist by sticking or by



fighting back with pushes against pushes. Nobody can instantly change their lifetime habits and responses, we have to work gradually, over long periods of time to do that. What we require is a partner who will assist us in the lesson of learning to let go. If your partner is working at a pace that doesn't allow you to let go why not ask him/her to slow down a little, repeat the same technique but with time for you to really feel what is happening, feel at a real deep level, without blocking. By voicing your concerns in a non-judgemental way you will find that your partner will become much more cooperative and helpful. Find a way that is conducive to learning, a way that lets you both discover where your blockages are, what your habits are and, hopefully, find a way to get beyond that which always sticks you.

Applications

The same principles apply to applications. Think about how you respond to an attack. Do

you flinch and hold yourself or do you calmly step aside and let the strike take its intended path without stepping in the way. In working with even highly experienced people we can still see when old habits and instinctive responses to flinch at an attack prevents effectiveness in applying tai chi principles to self-defence techniques. All too often it can look like they are being effective in evading a strike until you ask the attacker to follow-up immediately with a counter-strike. This tests the original response in a realistic way. it's okay to step aside from one strike with one, carefully rehearsed response but in reality you have to deal with repeated attack over a very short space of time.

Working against two continuous strikes either speeds up your responses or immediately stops you dead. If you haven't left enough space after the first strike you'll soon know about it when the 2nd follows instantaneously.

Get under pressure, in the safely-structured arena of a class, with people you know and trust and then you can train techniques and reflexes until you are able to apply them naturally whatever happens.

Competition Push Hands

The final push hands sessions we taught dealt with competition push hands. Again Gianni and I shared the group, half each. Gianni worked on training particular techniques whilst I took my group through a mock competition, putting each student in the various roles of competitor, referee and time-keeper.

It becomes very clear, very quickly, who has the right frame of mind for competing and it's also clear that for many practitioners this aspect has no interest whatsoever. One can understand and respect all points of view: some want to push hands to find out how they are in their bodies and others are interested to find out if they

have strong will-power, stamina and determination. Creating mock competitions can allow safe space for everybody to experience some competitive aspects and also, as the bouts filter the group down, also create space for the tougher aspects to come out. What is hard however, is to exercise tai chi principles when under pressure. We all know that and nowhere is it more evident than when we are under pressure of competition, when one wants to win over the other. Again we have an opportunity to tune into when we lose principles and hopefully find the space and time to re-introduce them as quickly as possible.

Espresso or Latte?

The Italians love their coffee, as do I. It seems that the Italians also love their tai chi and qigong. From 6.30am when they trot off to the beach for qigong exercises until 20.00 when they finish their final training sessions they seem willing to train hard and, from what I experienced at the beach party, also play hard.

Tai Chi offers many things to many people and all are okay in my book. Whether you want regular relaxing, centering exercise or whether you want to train in-depth to experience many other aspects - the choice is yours. You can enjoy the light milky froth or the strong deep strength of a well ground espresso, the choice is yours. Take what you think you need and try to get the very best you can from it!

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After my teaching on the island I decided to take a few days extra break to enjoy the sights of Venice. I've visited a number of times before but only when accompanied by locals can you really enjoy the pleasures it holds. Wondering around by foot for a couple of days allowed me to explore quiet squares, busy tourist areas and local bars. Food was reasonably priced, tasty and fresh and almost always accompanied by a nice local wine.

The last day I was taken to Murano, just after the last tourists had left and the shops were closing for the night. It was a pleasure to feel the essence of the place in the silence that prevailed. Later that night we did a pub crawl by speedboat ably piloted by Claudia's boyfriend. We sped through the wider canals, like something from a James Bond movie, and crawled through the narrowest canals in the deepest darkness before setting out of town for the open sea, switching off the engine and bathing in starlight whilst the boat gently rocked from side to side.

Thanks to all who looked after me in St Erasmo and, in particular to Claudia and Francesca who showed me how Venice should be seen.



Murano