

The New Normal

TAI CHI IN THE TIME OF COVID

BY JONO PODMORE

Back in February, nerves began to jangle about the possible spread of the novel Coronavirus. At Wu's Academy in Bethnal Green, London, under the guidance of Sifu Gary Wragg, we started to take steps to ensure people's safety during training. Reacting positively to unexpected or unwelcome change is at the heart of Tai Chi and in that spirit we began with social distancing efforts. This was of course frustrating for pushing hands and applications, but did actually help to increase sensitivity. It became obvious that we were going to have to be imaginative to find a way through the crisis safely and the teaching was already beginning to shift in emphasis to accommodate.

Soon, things were getting more serious. The first deaths from the virus in the UK were on 2nd March, which incidentally is the day before I came down with what I now believe to have been Coronavirus. At the time the government advice was that if I hadn't been to China recently or didn't have a dry cough I didn't need a test, despite having so many of the other symptoms of the disease. With hindsight it's clear that by this point, especially in London, the virus had taken hold.

Nevertheless we soldiered on at the academy, trying to keep within government guidelines with a regime of deep cleaning and socially distanced teaching. I was weakened but back on my feet and teaching again within a fortnight, yet nervousness meant class sizes were dwindling, infections in London were soaring and concern was growing for the vulnerable, despite the UK government dragging its heels.

We began looking into the possibilities of online teaching, and after much deliberation Sifu made the decision to close the club on 21st March, 2 days ahead of the government lockdown.

We spent some time deciding on an online platform. There were a number of possibilities discussed: Jitsi, Microsoft rooms, Skype, even Whats App groups were all in the mix, but eventually, and wisely as it turns out, we decided to go for Zoom. It's hard to imagine now that this was relatively unheard of software back in March. Now across the globe the infrastructure of entire nations is managed via Zoom.

One of the main reasons we chose Zoom is that it manages to maintain a reasonable picture quality despite the speed of the user's Internet connection. This is important to us in London, as our domestic Internet speeds are slow, still relying on the old copper wires installed for the telephones of last century.

We were not alone in deciding to move our teaching online. Where I work in higher education there have been plans afoot for a number of years to gradually move seminars online, open to discussion and review, with an eye on the possible economic benefits to universities. But as the pandemic struck the chinstroking was suddenly swept aside; teaching, meetings and even interviews moved online in a matter of days, embracing a range of subject specific platforms and leaving any unforeseen consequences to be mulled over later.

March 22nd was our inaugural, largely experimental online lesson. We had already created a Zoom account for the academy and sent out email invitations to our database to join us online for the regular Sunday morning



beginners and kids session. The plan was for the instructor to be at the academy and for the students to join in from the comfort of their own homes. I normally teach this class so we came up with a plan whereby I would teach as normal but to an empty room, and my colleague Egon Janikowski would take care of the transmission. We set up his iPad on a stand that gave a view of me with enough leeway for me to stay in shot for most of the form, checked the internet connection and waited for students to arrive - and so they did. Not only was the turnout better than expected, we noticed the beginning of a phenomenon that has characterised our experience - students logging in from overseas.

As this first lesson proceeded, it became immediately apparent that sound was a major issue. Forms or exercises in which students face away from their screen or close their eyes need to be talked through, as there are no physical cues from other students. It turns out talking more when teaching is surprisingly tiring, not just due to the extra effort but also the impact on breathing. The reverberant nature of our training hall also became an issue: if I wasn't directly facing the iPad my voice would be coming to the microphone indirectly from reflections off the walls and was much more difficult to understand,

especially with the low quality of the mono, data-compressed audio that Zoom provides.

On the whole, despite the steep learning curve, Lesson One was a success and we decided to schedule regular lessons, based on our previous "physical" timetable.

LOCKDOWN

UK-wide lockdown was brought in on the evening of Monday 23rd March. The motto was:

Stay home - Protect the NHS - Save lives.

For us this meant that teaching would now have to shift into the instructors' homes, no more trips to the club. As luck would have it, I had a head start. Due to my film and TV work I was already set up to work from home with screens and high-quality audio. Not only that, after moving some furniture around I found I had just enough space to perform the whole 108 form. Crucially, I could be far enough away from the camera that students could see my feet, so proper demonstration was possible.

I first put this into practice by offering Chi Kung sessions to friends and family, largely out of concerns for their health and particularly focussing on breathing, as it was assumed at the time that disease produced by the virus was a respiratory condition. 11 weeks later I still run 3 sessions a week with

students across the UK and US, all of whose health has remained intact throughout the pandemic, although at least one student has now tested positive for the antibodies and has had the virus. Like myself he has found Chi Kung to be a massive help in his recovery.

This was echoed in the teaching in the academy. The lack of pushing hands and applications lead to a shift towards health rather than martial aspects of Tai Chi. Chi Kung has featuring prominently in the new syllabus and the advanced sessions with Sifu have developed in to something more akin to seminars. We now have time to examine more sophisticated aspects of breathing in the forms and make ever-finer differentiations of yin and yang, with extended Q&A sessions.

Beginners' classes brought their own challenges. Unexpected interactions with spouses, children, pets and various members of the household could take place at any moment - even noisy neighbours could make an appearance. This extraneous noise, coupled with heavy breathing and creaky floorboards (and joints) all combined to necessitate a policy of asking all the students to mute their microphones during the lesson unless they had a question. This was a big help, especially with bigger groups.

Visually, the lenses on the cameras supplied with the laptops, tablets and phones have lead to difficulties with foreshortening, making it difficult to judge the height of hands for example; and for students in small spaces it is impossible for an instructor to see their whole body.

Teaching the form to beginners was proving to be a problem as most of them were at different stages, which lead us to make use of the "breakout rooms" facility in Zoom. This enables us to still be signed in to the same meeting, but broken up in to tiny subgroups, each with an instructor. In practice, one instructor teaches the class as usual, leading the warm up and basic exercises, and another is the "host", doing the digital admin: muting microphones and assigning the breakout rooms. Other instructors sign in after the first 45 min of the session to give individual tuition in a

breakout room before we all come together to finish the session with the form. Using this method we've managed to teach a couple of students the entire form. For one session Sifu taught in a breakout room which became so popular that, after recordings reached astronomic prices in the black market, it was decided to turn the breakout room in to a separate session in its own right.

Performing the form together was becoming problematic. In the club we would practice calmly in silence as a group, using our peripheral vision and hearing to keep synchronised with each other. But when the group is represented by a tiny, silent image on a screen this becomes impossible. Attempts to play the form as before resulted in sync being entirely lost. We would all end at different times, or take a turn in the form, catch sight of the screen and either freeze to let the others catch up or dash ahead to reach them. For beginners this meant at times they would not know where they were in the form at all. In our academy we use a system of counting to teach the form and to maintain attention to detail, as each movement has a count. We started experimenting with the instructor leading the class calling out the numbers as we moved through the form. This did indeed synchronise everyone and some of the students responded very positively as it gave them a chance to revise their counting. The problem was that all sense of calm in the form went out the window. It also puts the instructor under a surprising amount of stress; I would end the form sweating and panting with a dry mouth after counting throughout. We're currently experimenting with a compromise: the instructor calls out the names of some of the forms as we progress. This seems to be keeping us in sync so far and is reasonably comfortable for the instructor.

Sunday 17th May is a date that will live on infamy. I logged on in order to teach the scheduled session 10-15 min ahead as usual but had difficulties logging on. Students names began to appear but not video or audio. Something was very wrong. As ever in our relationships with this complex

technology, my reflex was to assume the problem was local - my Internet server, or Wi-Fi or "pilot error" had to be to blame. After resending the link to the students, eliminating other possible issues and frantic phone calls to work out was going on, we discovered the issue was with the Zoom network itself. Other clubs, groups and particularly churches were posting that they were having the same problems. After trying unsuccessfully to meet on another platform, and with the clock ticking, the lesson was abandoned - unheard of in our club. This was not a major catastrophe in the scheme of things, but a very healthy reminder of just how much we now rely on Zoom and how volatile online solutions can be.

THE NEW NORMAL

What started as a stopgap response to adversity is now at the centre of our teaching and structure - our new normal.

One of the biggest advantages of our online lessons is that students who have trained with us in person in London can now train with us wherever in the world they have pitched up to ride out the pandemic: from Haiti to Canada, from the US and across Europe, we are refreshing ties and training together - time zones permitting. One particularly diligent student in the mid-west of the US has been getting out of bed at 4 am to train with us a couple of times a week. He did this even on his birthday but assured us he was going straight back to bed afterwards...

A particularly positive expression of this aspect was the first online grading. A Russian student now based in Portugal and an Italian student in East London were due to grade before the lockdown came in to effect. After making sure they could get through the syllabus we decided to attempt a grading via Zoom. This involved 2 instructors: me in my flat in South London, and Egon at the academy in Bethnal Green (he lives just around the corner). It took longer than gradings usually do as Egon and I split the roles of leading the session, taking notes and asking questions. Grading the applications was perhaps the most bizarre. The instructor would make the attack towards their camera and the nervous candidates would respond with the appropriate defence to the

virtual assault. Allowances had to be made for inconvenient sofas or limbs disappearing out of shot but it was clear the guys knew their stuff and they passed their historic gradings to become intermediates.

We are now, like so much of the rest of the world, negotiating the delicate business of easing the lockdown without endangering lives or breaking increasingly opaque rules. UK rules currently allow up to 6 people to meet outdoors as long as they keep to social distancing guidelines, so we are offering sessions to small groups in a park near to the academy. A test and trace system is slowly becoming a reality here and the concern is that if cases appear that can be linked to any meetings organised by us, it could have an impact on the future of the club if we haven't kept strictly to the rules.

There is still much to be done before we can get back to training as before, but it's increasingly clear that the experience of the pandemic will have an impact on our behaviour in future. We should ensure that we bring any positives and lessons we've learned with us, even when the virus has ceased to be a threat. My feeling is that online lessons for students unable to physically attend the club are with us to stay, although no longer the core of the curriculum. The improvement in our understanding of the form developed in the seminars with Sifu will be of great benefit to us when we meet again at the academy to train, and the advantages of the current teaching method will also not be forgotten.

Our experience of the last 4 months coping with the ever-unfolding impact of the pandemic on our academy echoes the real life-and-death trauma faced on our medical frontline, albeit with only a fraction of the seriousness. To quote an NHS doctor who has worked on intensive care wards for more than 20 years:

"We're having to learn in a few months what we've learnt over many hundreds of years for other diseases, and that has been a real challenge."

We should congratulate ourselves on how well we have coped so far, but always maintain perspective in the enormity of the challenges and tragedy faced elsewhere.