



T'ai Chi

European School of T'ai Chi Chuan: Spring 2008 newsletter

SPEECH IS SILVER, SILENCE IS GOLD

Last November, Tew held his first retreat in Thailand for many years. Seven members of the UK school joined other students from Spain and Greece at the Baan Por Meditation Centre in Mae Rim near Chiang Mai for a week of silent practice. The following piece is a personal reflection from our new Chair, Sodge Adams.

Here I am, just turned fifty, and I'm off to the East for the first time. I'd begun to think I'd never get there but I'm pleased I'm going now, especially to do T'ai Chi. If I had gone in my youth, it would probably have been for the wrong reasons...getting stoned, partying.

The trip had an effect on me as soon as I signed up. Tew had said it would be a Long Form retreat so I finally decided to apply myself to learning it with his DVD and help from friends. I was still nervous and fearful of getting it wrong; even more so when I heard it was to be a five-day SILENT retreat. I had only ever done one day of silence before.

Saying goodbye to the family was hard. It would be the longest time I'd been separated from them in 20 years and my son really couldn't understand why I was going. My girlfriend - who is kindly typing this piece for me - is not happy when I say I swapped one family for another but that's how it felt when I met my friends at the airport. We all knew how lucky we were to be going, and I thought of the others who couldn't make it.

Tired after over 24-hours travel, we arrived at Noy Thompson's wonderful traditional Thai home - wooden buildings on stilts surrounded by trees and mountains and peace. However tired we were, it took our breath away.

The next day, after helping Tew and Noy prepare for the retreat, we met up with

around 40 fellow participants. The format for the week was to be similar to a Springhead retreat - an early morning warm-up with walking meditation; a day of Tien Xiao, sitting meditation, Long and Short Form plus some time for private practice. After dinner, we'd close with more sitting and chanting.

So, here we were 'saying' our last goodnights for five days. I was nervous - scared of the unknown. It reminded me of when I was young and took an hallucinogenic pill, not sure what was going to happen.

From the first session, as the sun rose into a misty sky, the silence became very special. Soon it felt like a close friend - present but not intruding - and I wondered what I'd been scared of. I had worried it would mean a lack of instruction but following Tew and the others was just as powerful without words.

A particularly good time was late afternoon when we'd go off for private practice or to meditate or draw. I worked on Long Form reverse, and felt the T'ai Chi get deeper inside me like it had never quite done before.

On the third day, a funny thing happened. Louanne and a Greek student, Gianni, who had been practising together, got into a conversation which went on and on. I found myself feeling angry at them for distracting me. I asked myself: why was I getting so angry? After all, they were only talking but I couldn't stop the anger, and as it stayed with me throughout the following meditation, I decided to write them both a note.

Gianni looked genuinely surprised by his note and Louanne promptly wrote back to hers saying: "He was Greek and I was weak!" This cracked me up and cleared away any lingering bad feelings very effectively.

Through this episode, I became aware of the fear behind my anger which is something I have often experienced - fear of failure, fear of looking out of place. I also saw it in other group members as they feared making a mistake in the Long Form - usually during reverse or flowing. Funny to see this in a bunch of people who must have been told that the 'being there' is more important than how good one is.

As the five days came to an end, I didn't really want the silence to finish. Yes, I wanted to talk to people but I felt safe in the experience. At the close, there was a crescendo of laughter and socialising. It was fun getting to know people with whom till then we'd only acknowledged by eye contact.

After we said our goodbyes, a few of us travelled South visiting some beautiful ancient sites, eventually arriving in Bangkok to be reunited with most of the group at a party at the Mercy Centre.

I was lucky enough to stay at the Centre for three days. It was wonderful to meet all the children and see the great work that is being done there. The children were so full of fun and excitement. I had brought some printed t-shirts with me from London and it was a pleasure to hand them out and see them being worn. The Thai people in general are so warm and welcoming, always smiling and greeting one with a lovely bow. We were very well looked after wherever we went.

At this point, I was supposed to return to London but decided to stay on a few extra days to travel further South with Tew. He and his team from the Human Development Foundation were going to visit communities they've been helping since the tsunami. I was very privileged to see their work with the poorest people who have had little assistance from the government.

*“the
being
there”*

*“the
metta
practice”*

While tourist resorts have been rebuilt to very high standards to attract the necessary foreign business, many people in the area are living in terrible conditions. The Foundation's work is focussed mainly on providing houses with large water containers that catch the rainfall during the wet season to store water for washing, cleaning and cooking in the subsequent months. There are also projects setting up small vegetable plots and crab farms in the mangrove swamps and providing families with pigs to rear.

Some of the people are pretty laid back so Tew and the team work hard on motivating them to help themselves recover from the tsunami devastation, where so many people lost their loved ones, their homes, their boats and their livelihoods.

Now I have seen Tew doing the work he is so passionate about and dedicated to. Before I had only experienced his love of T'ai Chi and the metta practice, but now I see where he channels the energy he gets from the practice, and I feel I know more of the whole person that he is.

Back in the rush that is London life, my practice goes well and I can feel a bit of the silence still inside me. I do feel different; perhaps less rushed and under pressure. I'd like to repeat the silence one day. It doesn't matter where. I'd like to experience it and let my mind/body/spirit recharge itself.

In February at the AGM, I accepted the post of Chair and immediately felt fear of failure and not being up to the job. I now recognise the fear for what it is, I take a slow deep breath and quietly get on with it.

Thank you to everyone who shared the retreat with me, those who organised it, and all my friends at the European School - and my ever-patient, non-T'ai Chi-practising girlfriend for typing this out for me!

THE PRIDE OF KLONG TOEY

In May, Khun Usanee, the director of the Mercy Centre in Bangkok, and some of her colleagues will be travelling to London and Oxford to set up the Human Development Foundation in England. The following piece written by Father Joe Maier, co-founder of the Foundation, tells the story of one family the organisation has helped.

Fon, Fa and Fai are triplets, total look-alikes, same height, same weight, the essence of 10-year-old Thai girls: sugar and spice and giggles, unable to sit still for two seconds. And secrets. Maybe the best secret-tellers on this planet, they giggle at their secrets, falling over themselves. They sleep, arms and legs sprawling everywhere, their beds pushed together in our girls' dormitory.

Life started off so wonderfully. Dad, Dhey, and mom, Bho, noticed each other in high school, graduated and married at 20. When the doctor told Bho she was pregnant with triplets, Bho came home dreamy-eyed. She and Dhey were still in love, renting a shack with her parents, granny Praphai and grandpa Duey, in Klong Toey, Bangkok.

Granny worked nights as a 'Bheen rua' which means climbing up the backside of a ship docked in port to offer whatever solace a lonely sailor might seek. It was cash up front, usually with booze, food and foreign cigarettes for her to sell on to her neighbours. Granny promised Bho she'd help with the babies and even grandpa offered some of his whiskey money.

When the triplets first came to the Mercy Centre pre-school, all was well. The girls were in neat matching outfits and seldom missed a day. But soon Bho began wearing gold or 'furniture' as we call it - a sure sign of dealing drugs. Life went downhill as it always does. The bad guys won, getting Bho addicted so they could pay her in drugs instead of the cash the family needed.

The day everything fell apart, Bho picked up one of the girls from their stroller and a pack of drugs fell to the ground - right in front of an undercover cop who'd been watching her for days. The triplets screamed, hanging on to their mom as the police dragged her away.

The triplets were taken in by granny who by

now was crippled from a stroke. The tiny girls would push and shove granny into her chair, then wheel her along the slum paths by the canal to the Mercy Centre. Soon, the triplets were missing more school than not and when they did attend, their names were 'snot-nosed', 'runny-ears' and 'messy-hair'.

The neighbours became very concerned about grandpa. He worked as a bag man, collecting rubbish but spent more on whiskey than he earned from scrounging, and began threatening to rent out his granddaughters. With the girls like sick kittens, the neighbours wheeled them to the Centre and asked for our help. Granny signed the papers and cried. The girls were under strict medical care for over a year. They'd missed a lot of meals.

Seven years on, mom Bho has married again and is at home, caring for granny. Grandpa died a few months ago - the demon rum finally got him. Bho often visits us to see her daughters. The other week, she took them home to see granny. The girls begged to sleep over just once but Bho refused. Maybe the loving hurts too much.

Dad is also back in the area and visits too. He likes to take home the girls' school uniforms to wash. It's something he can do. But recently, he stopped coming again. He's been spaced out and wild-eyed: most probably from glue mixed with paint thinner.

Both parents grew up in the hard-core drug part of the slum. It scarred them both. We know they loved their daughters. Maybe they weren't ready; but then, life catches us all off guard, doesn't it?

The girls are growing up, saving their lunch money for granny so she can play cards. I asked the girls what they want to be. Miss Fon and Miss Fai both want to be doctors but Miss Fa wants to be a lady soldier - she says she looks pretty in uniform.

The moral of the story, the ending? Perhaps the old proverb: 'Dogs may bark but the caravan moves on.'

Louanne Richards & Sue McAlpine will be helping Usanee with fundraising events between 26 & 30 May. For details please contact: louannerichards@yahoo.com

RETREATS IN 2008

Springhead, Dorset: *T'ai Chi, Chi Kung & meditation with Juanolo & Tew*
16-18 May (Juanolo) 3-5 October (Tew)

Spain: *T'ai Chi & meditation with Tew & Dhira*
11-13 April (Tew) 18-20 April (Dhira)

Oxford: *Meditation, Qigong & T'ai Chi with Allegra Wint & Louanne Richards*
20 April 10:30-17:00

Girona, Spain: *T'ai Chi with Juanolo*
2-4 May & 4-6 July

Casa Lucia, Corfu: *T'ai Chi & Chi Kung with Tew*
9-11 May

Monein, France: *T'ai Chi, Yoga & Shiatsu with Sue Woodd*
15-23 May

Gascony, France: *T'ai Chi & meditation with Jos Hadfield & Louanne Richards*
6-13 July

Casa Lucia, Corfu: *Tai Chi Art & Image 2 with Caroline Merry & friends*
25 Aug-1 Sept

T'AI CHI CLASSES

Sodge Adams – Hampstead

Louanne Richards – Oxford

Jos Hadfield – Farnham

Chris Sadler – Inverness

Saskia Handley – Corfu

Richard Siviak – York

Georgina MacLaurin –
Isle of Man

Kamal Thapen – Balham

Sue McAlpine – Islington

Tracey Underhill – Sway, New Forest

Caroline Merry – Oxford

Sue Webber – Egham

Jane Muir – Tooting

Julia Webster – Farnham

Valerie Osborne – Corfu

Sue woodd - Farnham & London