

Pushing in Prague

This year the International Push Hands Meeting in Prague took place at a new venue. No longer on the picturesque island below the bridge over the River Vltava, this year it was farther east, in the TJ Sokol Vinohrady building. Helmut Oberlack reports



Tina Faulkner Elders takes the warm-up exercises

This is an old imposing structure set back from the main road and surrounded by trees. At the back are fields that are used for various activities including football. Inside, the marble floors and stairs lead to many rooms which have been repurposed for various sporting/gymnastic activities. The Taiji Akademie where the event took place is situated on the top floor and climbing the stairs in the humidity that we experienced that weekend proved to be a useful warmup.

The work area comprised a main room with a good wooden floor and a high ceiling. There was also a smaller room as well as an outdoor area which made a good practice spot in the fresh air.

The usual format was followed: a choice of two workshops each morning followed by free pushing sessions in the afternoon. The three teachers, Tina Faulkner Elders, Gordon Faulkner and Tomasz Nowakowski each took two workshops during the weekend.

We started with Tina Faulkner Elders taking us through the san quan, the three circles. This is a series of exercises for the hips, spine and shoulders or, more specifically, kua, jian and yao to develop a deeper understanding of internal and external structure through which to move force.

These were delivered with Tina's usual enthusiasm and lucid explanations of the method, detail and the purpose of each, together with warnings of common errors to be



watchful for.

The outdoor area on the roof was big enough to accommodate Tina's workshop. This was very welcome as it allowed us to work in the relatively cooler fresh air. It also allowed us to observe the rain in the distance getting closer and closer!

Meanwhile Gordon was inside leading his group through chu shou, touch hands. Gordon emphasised that the sense of touch is subtle but powerful and how the palms, and fingertips in particular, absorb much information and feeling and are used in reading their environment. Through a series of partner exercises he helped us experience how we can understand and respond in a push hands setting, the important aspect of this being not just to receive the information but how to interpret it.

Over the weekend we progressed to taiji qin na. Again we worked with partners under Gordon's guidance using the more subtle and internal principles of tai chi to manipulate joints and control limbs. As always with Gordon this was delivered in a clear, concise manner with a dash of his usual dry humour.

Thomasz' shapes of balance system has the basis that if you know a technique you know a technique but if you understand a concept you know a thousand techniques.

Using this approach we looked at some individual forms and their applications with a partner, comparing examples from the sang feng and Yang styles. This required us to investigate timing, structure, coordination and awareness in partner work.

The free push hands sessions in the afternoon followed the familiar format of timed ten-minute sessions. The participants were varied, from the totally inexperienced to the very experienced, from the sensitive to the very physical. All in all it was good for giving players the opportunity to work on just about every aspect of their pushing (and receiving).

Ivo had the extra-curricular activities well organised. There was a dinner organised on each night. On the first night the restaurant was a couple of tram stops away, so some opted out and smaller groups went their own way to eat and drink in some of the many good alternatives that were more convenient (it is Prague, after all).

On the Saturday Ivo had organised a meal in a nearby micro-brewery / restaurant which everybody attended. We were treated to some (very) good local beers and food, and good conversation, much to everybody's enjoyment.

After the pushing session on the Saturday we were treated to some demonstrations, not just from the three teachers, but from some of the participants as well. You can check these out on the website at

www.pushhands.cz

An interesting development on the final day was an announcement from Severin Berz from Switzerland. He is in the process of building a website which is a worldwide directory to provide easy access to information about push hands events: international meetings and workshops, but also regional meetings in parks and regular classes. A great way to find training buddies near wherever you happen to be, especially when travelling. The website is:

www.pushhands.com

and he also has a Facebook page for this at:

www.facebook.com/pushhandsdirectory

The whole Prague event was well-organised, as usual, by Ivo Marvan, Thomasz Nowakowski and Zofia Polak and ran very smoothly. Thanks, guys; looking forward to next year's. ☯

