

UK Summer Training Cheltenham

First of all... Big hello! My name is Sas and I live and work in London. I've studied with the London School of T'ai Chi Chuan for about six years now, and from the first time I took a yin-yang breath knew that I was investing in both my immediate present and my long term future. I've always been struck by the quote from Professor Cheng Man Ch'ing who, when asked what is the most important reason for studying T'ai Chi, replied "so that when you finally understand what life is about, you'll have some health to enjoy it." You don't get much better a reason than that.

What follows is an entirely subjective account of what I personally got up to at Summer Training rather than a description of the whole programme. I missed awesome things because I'd signed up to do other awesome things. You can't swim AND attend lectures on transcendental pantheism for example. And absolutely no one was going to be willing to let a student near a sword (can't deny the sense in this). Simply put, you simply don't have the time to do everything, unless you've found a way to clone yourself (you might... I don't know).



The August's training was my second time around, and was held once again at Dean Close, a private day and boarding school in Cheltenham, England. You may only have heard of Cheltenham in connection with its world-famous Gold Cup horse race, but if that is the case, you're missing out. It's

a delightful Regency town on the edge of the Cotswolds, chock-full of history, beautiful architecture and peaceful gardens.

The day everyone arrives is always slightly chaotic and the school complex is huge. Hot and slightly flustered I find my way to the registration office where I am welcomed by a smiling Barbara and Erica, and directed to my room in one of the school's boarding houses over the road. The rooms are predictably small and battered by generations of kids. However, the shower is hot, the grounds are beautiful and the school clearly spends its income on its excellent facilities. Teenagers probably don't notice the sellotape stains.

The evening kicks off with an info session in the old theatre and a beautiful silent demo by the senior teachers of the first third of the form. They all move so smoothly together - it's a joy to watch. No one falls off the stage. Win.



Next day the fun really starts. Five days of super full-on activities. Make no mistake people... T'ai Chi will set your soul on fire. Your centre of balance is going to drop a foot. You're going to connect your *qi* to 80 or so fascinating people over the week. Energy will dribble from your fingers. You're going to chill out and relax massively. But this is NOT a rest cure. By Day 3 you are not going even to be able to feel your legs.

So what does a day look like? Discounting the teachers who get up seemingly before everyone else has even gone to bed in order to get some peace and quiet to train and practice, here's what's on offer...



0715-0745 Practice rounds by the cricket pitch (definitely not ON the pitch). My friend Giovanna says this is her favourite part of the day. I am an afternoon flamingo rather than an early bird so I stay resolutely asleep and hoard my energy for later.

0730 Breakfast in the school canteen (forget

stories of English school food: this is a bit tasty)



0900-1000 Qi Gong for the whole group. This year Gerrie led the fascinating Roots and Branches course across Winter, Spring, Summer, Late Summer, Autumn. Lovely way to start the day.

1000-1100 Class 1 - everyone splits into different teaching spaces according to their levels and receives instruction. Other optional higher levels like sword are practiced during the afternoon.

1130-1215 Relaxation & Meditation. The group comes together again and is led by Patrice in an hour's mindfulness and meditation. Actually, I've found group meditation isn't really my bag. So I go and sit alone with a cup of camomile tea and reflect on the qi gong class, or practice my form, or chat with friends. There's no pressure from anyone which is nice.

1230-1300 Lunch - yum yum. Always starving by this point. By the way it can really not be underestimated how *nice* it is to stop thinking about cooking (or indeed eating out) for a week and just show up, grab a tray, be served something tasty and healthy by the charming catering team, go and sit with a new bunch of interesting people and then put your tray on a conveyor belt to disappear.

1400-1500 Class 2. Your legs are hurting. Your brain is buzzing.

Afternoon - This is where you need to start the cloning. There are lots of options. You might attend a *Time in the Art* lecture. You might practice your sword form (if you're very experienced, otherwise you can just watch and appreciate), you might stroll into Cheltenham town, or if you're me you've been waiting all year to jump into the school's gorgeous 30m indoor pool and brush up on your Hawaiian swimming. That's going to get its own paragraph – keep reading.

1830-1900 Dinner. Baseball slide to the back of the queue because you nearly forgot the time.

2000 Evening activities. These could be anything! You might be drawing bears and owls with the lovely Johanna. You might watch T'ai Chi films. A highlight was an interview over Zoom with the wonderful Natasha Gorky Young, one of the

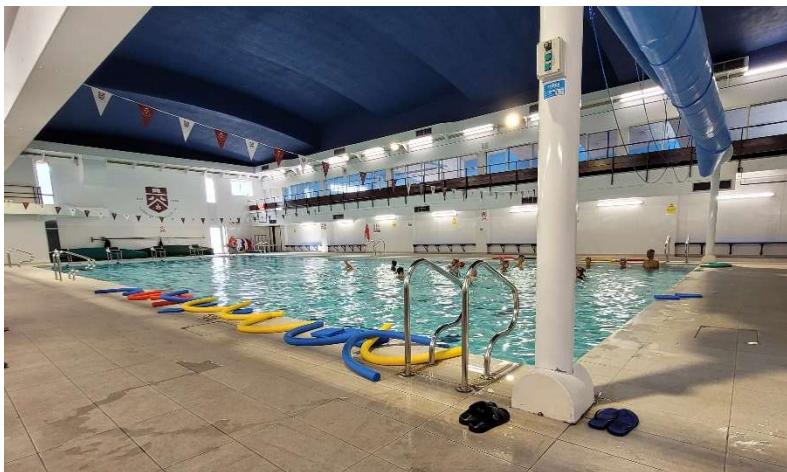


original pupils of Chen Man Ch'ing in New York, and whose husband, Ed Young, was a contemporary of Patrick Watson, the founder of our school.

After that there might be a cheeky glass of wine in the school's theatre bar. Or a camomile tea and a early night.

So you can see the days were stuffed full and I'm positive I've forgotten to mention something.

A word on the classes. They're interesting because you're compressing a term's worth of teaching into a week. It's the same number of sessions (10) but you're building on your learning hour by hour. It's incredibly intense and the information you absorb in this way is increased by an order of magnitude. This summer I studied Intermediate Form, led by the frankly fabulous and super experienced Patrice and Griff. The team-teaching aspect of our school is amazing, and never more so when teachers are paired up for the first time. It's like blind date... but with more single whip. Patrice & Griff work brilliantly together and it was just so much fun. Serious of course, but with moments of truly delicious levity where the laughter flows. My classmates and I (I think we were 8) are all really in sync in terms of where we are with our practice so everyone feels on the same page and helps each other along in our private practice between classes if someone is struggling with a particularly tricky turn or set of movements. The class was held in an art studio. Fearsome clay heads shaped by students peer at us from the garden outside and give me a major start more than once when I look out the window mid-practice.



And now - the swimming. I'm obsessed with Hawaiian Swimming, which is the name given to this particular style. You're using T'ai Chi principles, harnessing your qi energy to power yourself through the water. You watch the teachers swim like porpoises. You follow the drills. It feels totally counterintuitive. You feel like a

half drowned corkscrew heading for the base of the pool. And then bam! Something happens and for a few strokes you're weightless and slipping along with no effort at all! The feeling is indescribable. You're addicted in one hit. They have to crowbar you out of the pool at the end of the lesson and you're counting the hours until you're allowed to get back in and have another bash. The lead teacher for this is Vicky Shackford over from the US, a woman of such consummate skill, good humour, life experience and patience that it's all I can do to stop myself from following her around all week serenading her with the theme tune from *Flipper* and making heart hands. Everyone should learn to swim with Vicky, and her teaching team are all just as amazing.

The last night is a gala dinner, followed by a talent show and a party. You've just been sharing body and soul energy with 80-odd people all week so these things can get a bit euphoric. I got to MC the show this year (*faute de mieux* I freely admit). We had songs, poetry, a cheeky lullaby, the most

gorgeous jazz piano and vocals, acapella and THE funniest skit by the B1 students. I took a vid but it's shaky as I was absolutely crying with laughter. The party was brilliant fun, I went to bed far too late and I'll simply say my head was unaccountably sore the next day.

Still with me? Good. Because I want to talk about two more things before I get back to embracing the dao.

The first is the vibe of these camps. What's it like to be part of one? Why would someone want to come alone and join us for a week? They're intense... But chilled. Serious in their focus... But full of laughter. Your muscles ache... But you're so relaxed. You're totally knackered by the end... But you've never felt so alive. The collective energy of the group grows hour by hour. You watch new connections being endlessly formed. Real conversations are had - way beyond 'how are you? Oh I'm



fine'. People are all really *listening* to each other. Coming back for a second year was extra emotional. There were a couple of impromptu evenings spent in groups of some of the most fascinating women I've ever met. The stories and life experience freely shared... It was a joy and a privilege. Btw don't get me wrong - the guys on the training were 11/10 amazing as well - I did warn you this was a personal account of what I got up to.

The second thing I want to talk about is the teachers. The teachers of the London School of T'ai Chi Chuan and the T'ai Chi Foundation are volunteers. They're here for the love of it, not to get rich. They pay to come to Summer Training just like you and I. And then they get up before dawn to train and power all the way through. They do this because they believe so strongly in the joy and the benefits of T'ai Chi and they love the community that between they have built and continue to nourish. So guys, I'm going to finish by saying thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything that you do. Never stop. And I'm so happy to apprentice with you and share the love too.

Sas xx