

## STUDENT PROFILE: JOHN BARBIERO

By WTS Staff

Originally Published March 2011

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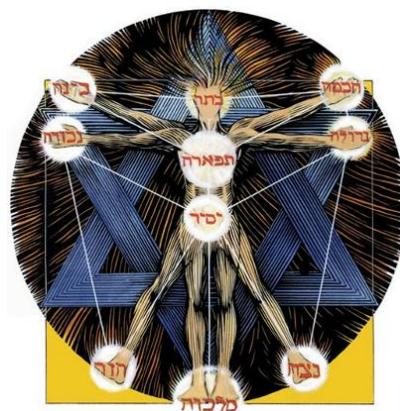
McElroy Laoshi tells us that he is often surprised by the divergent points-of-view when it comes to people and what they consider as “too far” to travel for T'ai Chi classes. He tells us that some people make an inquiry call from Medford and, when they are told the studio is in Patchogue, they will quickly thank him for his time and ring off. Such is not the case with John Barbiero. John joined the studio in July last year and travels in the neighborhood of 60 mile roundtrip every Sunday from North Bellmore to participate in the offerings of Water Tiger School. It may make for a long journey each week, but it is quite short when compared to the journey that has been unfolding for John and which has brought him to the art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

John has found himself struggling over the course of his life, as many of us do, with maintaining a healthy body weight. He admits that it was only early in his life that he was at what might be considered a normal body mass index. John views his overindulgence in food as a way of to numb his emotions – fear, loneliness, depression. He shares, “The resulting body changes I had to endure led me to become very escapist and very much a dreamer who would rather daydream, read books, or watch movies than live life.” He confesses that he came to hate being in his own skin, “I tried very hard to find concealing clothing to put it all out of sight as I tried to live on the sidelines and not attract too much attention for I imagined that I would only receive bare tolerance, at best, and ridicule, at the worst.”

Hiding his body from himself and others was not the only thing that he did. He sought to sever any mind / body connection that existed naturally. The Kabbalah is the mystical tradition of Judaism and there is a Christian form of working with this meditation system that ideally would honor and take account of the physical life. John, however, used this Christian-based approach to Kabbalah as another method of escape from his reality. He admits, “I tried to seek enlightenment and liberation from the physical and the mundane aspects of a world that I felt could never accept me or offer to me the love I so desperately needed, but could not believe myself capable of receiving.”

If it were not for what he describes as a mysterious physical pain, John might still be tranquilizing himself with food and escaping the real world through books and movies. The battery of tests he experienced revealed the pain was rooted in the wear and tear of aging and the beginnings of arthritis. However, the fear generated by the need of the tests was a wakeup call for him. Weight Watchers became a part of his life. With time and dedication, John was able to drop 130 pounds from his frame. He does not give Weight Watchers sole credit for his success. “I found a particularly beautiful form of mystical Christian prayer, called the Armour of Light,” John explains. “It speaks of feeding the body with the Light of God’s love and I feel that this daily prayer allowed me to feel connected to the Divine and receiving what I needed from the Divine so that I could successfully work through Weight Watchers and reach my goal weight.” He tells us that he still recites the prayer every day and continues to follow the meal plan he learned from his time with Weight Watchers. He looks at his issues with eating as an alcoholic in recovery looks at drinking: “One is too much and a thousand is not enough.”

His weight loss, however, led to a new issue. After having been stretched out for so many years, his skin had lost its elasticity. John accepts that there is no such thing as a physically perfect person, does not want to take the risk associated with body lift surgery, and is looking forward to feeling alive in his own skin. His journey to accept his perfect self has included a return to psychotherapy



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and a twice monthly craniosacral massage therapy. The latter strives to remove emotional blockages in the body through manipulation of the fluids in the brain and spine. Even though John was experiencing success with this leg of his journey, something happened that took things in a new direction. He explains, "I went to see the movie *The Last Air Bender* and was immediately struck with the notion that what the actors were doing was T'ai Chi and I had to do T'ai Chi!"

As soon as he got home after the movie, John went online, did a search for T'ai Chi on Long Island, and found Water Tiger. He tells us that he always trusts his instincts when it comes to making choices of this type and immediately felt that the distance did not matter as Water Tiger was the place he needed to be. An email went out to Laoshi. The email thread switched to a phone conversation. Six days after his initial email, John's journey with Water Tiger began with a private lesson on a Saturday afternoon to confirm what his instincts were telling him and to get his feet wet. The hour confirmed that he had found what he needed and he returned the next day for his first regular class.

John's words are best to describe how he feels regarding his weekly experience on the mat:

I truly love Sunday evenings at the Water Tiger Kwoon and the rituals that get us into the sacred space for this undertaking. These rituals move our minds from the outside world to the world of our Kwoon and they are simple yet effective. I love that we bow to our place of learning as we enter and leave the mat. I love that we bow to our lineage leader Yang Chein-Ho and then to Laoshi. And I love that we do our meditation before embarking on the evening's learning. The closing *T'ai Chi Qigong Breathing Set* is like the icing on the cake or the finishing touches that brings everything to an inner place of peace and serenity that I feel in my body and not just in my mind and for that I am so completely grateful!

The concept of Qi is something with which John easily connects. He equates it to a similar concept in his experience with Christian Kabbalah; though, he tells us the Kabbalah work does not include physical movements as most of our work does on the mat. It is that – the movement on the mat – he finds the most challenging. That challenge is two-fold. The first is the frustration that can develop when his years of shutting off the communication between body and mind limit his feeling if his body position is correct. The second is coping with his desire to leap ahead to the next thing too soon. In his words, "Laoshi and the senior students have helped me not compare myself and my current results to what they are able to do."

He tells us that he has already felt a difference in his ability to carry a sense of peace into his work as a clinical social worker as he seeks to help people living with HIV / AIDS. He feels this peace is cultivated through his daily practice – which is not yet where he wants it to be, but it's headed in the right direction. It is that daily experience with T'ai Chi that he sees as the way to "honor the temple of [his] body and help [him] to see [his] own inner beauty and capacity to be loved and to finally feel that in a body that is fully aware and fully alive."



**John (R) is grateful for the help he receives from his fellow students. Here the help is coming from Lem Coley while they play *Symbiotic Push Hands*.**

