

STUDENT PROFILE: JAMES BRENNAN

By WTS Staff

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Although James Brennan tells us that his journey with the martial arts began at a young age with a few classes, it was not until he began college in 1998 that the first step truly fell. He was attending Syracuse University majoring in physics and philosophy when he selected a course in karate. He explains, "I needed something in its group of elective courses and I thought it would be good exercise." Soon after, he happened upon a commercial for a local Shaolin Kung Fu program and really liked what he saw.

It was in his program of study with Sifu Daniel Hammond at Harmonious Fist that brought his first exposure to T'ai Chi. Hammond Sifu was well known in the martial arts community and would often host other instructors from other arts. One of those instructors was a Chen-style teacher. James might not remember the teacher's name, but it was that experience that began a path of nearly 15 years that eventually led him to Water Tiger.

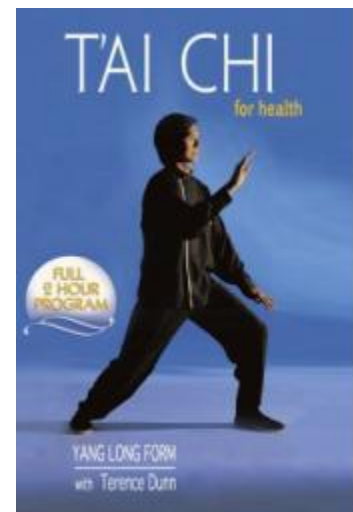
"This is when I first learned that T'ai Chi Ch'uan was more than just some relaxing movements that old Chinese ladies do in the park in the morning," James admits. "He showed that T'ai Chi is, in fact, a martial art." The guest instructor was only there for a short time and was able to work with James on just the first couple of movements from one of the Chen-style forms. But, his short visit hooked James: "Right away I wanted to learn more about T'ai Chi."

Although Hammond Sifu knew T'ai Chi, he insisted his style took precedence over the study of T'ai Chi. James did, however, take advantage of other guest artists to learn as much as he could about the Chinese internal arts and spent time with instructors of both Xingyi and Bagua. James tells us that he felt as if he had learned very little when he graduated and left Syracuse in 2002.

His return to Long Island began a two-part search. He had been learning a staff form at Harmonious Fist and was looking for a staff to continue his practice. He was also looking for a T'ai Chi school. Neither search was met with success. None of the martial arts schools he visited would sell him a staff and the T'ai Chi schools were either not a fit or were too far away.

James' brother had begun training at the Rocky Point Shaolin Studio, the home of Ed Turney who participated in this year's *World T'ai Chi & Qigong Day – Patchogue* and where James has been supplementing his training on the mat at Water Tiger with classes in Qigong. Like Hammond Sifu, the Rocky Point studio wants a student to complete training in Shaolin before beginning study in T'ai Chi. James was also concerned that their focus on sparring and the fact he'd studied elsewhere would lead to an air of competition. He kept looking.

James tells us he had to finally accept defeat and opt for self-study. He purchased a VHS copy of Terry Dunn's *T'ai Chi for Health: Yang Long Form*. After about four months of what we have to assume was diligent practice, he was able to play the form on his own. The process became the source of both great joy and disappointment. James explains, "It felt so good every time I did practice on my own, however, I also felt like I had a lot of questions and I was frustrated at



Unable to find a suitable T'ai Chi program on Long Island in 2002, James opted for self-study and purchased a VHS copy of Terry Dunn's T'ai Chi for Health: Yang Long Form.

having no one to ask.” After a year of play on his own, the frustration combined with a lack of time due to work and he walked away from it all.

It was 10 years later in the early winter of 2013 that things changed. According to James, “I was really getting out of shape and I somehow hurt my shoulder lifting a tea pot!” That was it for him. He began his search for a T'ai Chi program again. This time he was able to find a number of schools in Suffolk County, but thought Water Tiger provided the best fit. He saw that he could continue in the same style with which he was familiar from his time with the Terry Dunn tape and could take more than one class per week. He walked into the studio at 29 South Ocean for his first direct contact with the school on Sunday, February 12, 2013.

Since he joined Water Tiger, there have been times that he's had to step back from his regular attendance. But, he still maintains a rigorous practice schedule that consistently hits two hours each day. As 2013 moved into 2014, personal business took him to the UK from early December to mid-March. Not only did he take time to practice on a relatively regular basis, he also found and took formal classes with Tony Jones at his studio, South Oxfordshire Tai Chi Chuan. James tells us Mr. Jones, who preferred to be called simply “Tony”, worked using the 24-posture form as the curriculum and taught a much more compact approach to Yang-style. Mr. Jones, a short, rotund man, joked with James about telling people upon his return to the States that he “met this magic leprechaun” on his trip.

Since James first stepped on Water Tiger's mat, he's worked his way through our *Grasp Sparrow's Tail to the Four Cardinal Directions* – to both left and right, and is now working his way through the first two postures of our *Dragon Strikes to the Four Diagonal Directions*.

“I'm so glad that I found Water Tiger School,” affirms James. “I really appreciate Laoshi's vast knowledge of stretches and Yang-style forms. I also love the quality-over-quantity style of teaching.” He views the foundational exercises leading into one posture at a time as a more thorough process. “I feel like I've learned so much, I've changed so much from learning it, and I recognize I still have so much more to learn.”

Some of what James has learned is how life in the studio can parallel life on the water – he not only repairs boats for a living, he also crews racing boats and sails on his own. “On a sailboat,” he explains, “you can't force anything.” Making another parallel, he paraphrases a favorite quote from the well-known sailing memoir by Bernard Moitessier, *The Long Way*, “The distance covered is all that matters, not getting to the horizon.”



James (R) playing Split as he works his way through the first two postures of Water Tiger's Dragon Strikes to the Four Diagonal Directions.

