

## STUDENT PROFILE: JON CABEL

By WTS Staff

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*By request for privacy reasons, the name of the student has been changed.*

Members of the regular classes of Water Tiger are probably scratching their heads as they begin to read this profile. They are probably asking themselves – and others in the studio: “Who’s Jon Cabel?” Jon is a private student of McElroy Laoshi from Coram and has been attending weekly one-on-one sessions with him since early September of last year.

Jon’s journey with T’ai Chi Ch’uan actually began before he had any inkling that he was on such a journey. He relates a story from his childhood:

I was watching my elderly uncle cleaning his summer home by gently moving the spiders and the ants out by hand or paper. He never harmed one of them. I asked him in the way of a child, “Why don’t you just kill them?” To which he responded “Can you make a new spider?” I, of course, didn’t understand. He explained further “Don’t be so eager to destroy something that you can never replace. Just because I can kill it doesn’t make me better. It doesn’t make you a strong man to kill; it takes strong man to show mercy.

Jon continues to share that he didn’t know until he was older that his uncle had been a part of some of the worst fighting during World War II. Regardless, he admits that the words have always resonated with him. He spells out their meaning, “Master your own aggression and you’ll be a stronger man.”

The next leg on Jon’s journey unfolded when he was in the City and watching a martial arts demonstration in one of the parks. He tells us that there were many groups demonstrating the usual dramatic moves with which we’re all familiar from the movie screen. There were great leaps, dynamic kicks, shattered boards, etc. He, however, noticed a small group that drew little attention. Its members moving slowly in unison in what he would later come to know as T’ai Chi. He explains, “The group drew my attention over all others due to the feeling of tranquility and peace that pervaded their training.”

His interest in pursuing the martial arts originated with a desire to move toward a healthier lifestyle. He’d suffered a year with a taxing illness and the martial arts seemed like the direction to go. One, in his words, that offered both “spiritual and physical health.”

As Mike was searching for a program, he kept running into the same attitude he witnessed in the NYC park. He describes the various programs promoting a point-of-view that would make his uncle cringe. By his description of his experiences, we can easily picture Sensei John Kreese putting his boys through their drills at Cobra Kai. A phrase Jon cites as an example of his experience is: “It’s not about who’s right or wrong; it’s about kicking ass.” As a way to test the waters of the point-of-view of the instructors he met, Jon tells us he began to ask a simple – if not odd – question: “How does an avalanche begin?” The answers he continued to receive included things such as “by smashing rocks” ... “by destroying the base of the mountain” ... “by the greater crushing the lesser” ... etc. Much to Jon’s disappointment, all the answers translated to “by force or aggression”.

Things changed when a friend talked him into taking a continuing education T’ai Chi class at the Comsewogue High School. The first day of class, the instructor did a move that Jon recognized from that day in the park and the light-bulb flashed. The teacher was Judith Budd-Walsh of Harmonious Movement in Port Jefferson Station and a friend of Water Tiger. Judith steered Jon in our direction. She tells us, “I could see that he wanted to expand his practice beyond health and healing to the martial arts application. I knew sending him to McElroy Laoshi would be a step in the right direction.” Oddly, Jon tells



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us Water Tiger was already on his short list of T'ai Chi schools to investigate. He made the call and two days later he was on the mat at 29 South Ocean.

Jon remembers that his first day with Laoshi left him smiling. He says, "There was an entirely different 'feel' from the moment I entered the studio." But it was something else that sealed the deal for him. He asked his avalanche question. Laoshi answered, "By a single rock moving aside." After much searching, he knew that he'd finally found the program for which he'd been looking.

The smile has stayed with him over the past eight months, but the credit is shared. Jon says it is both the school and learning the art that keeps him coming back. According to him, he continues to find challenge and fulfillment with his time on the mat.

One challenge he had before joining Water Tiger. "I won't use the term out of shape," he explains. "I'm sure there is some formula in geometry that could explain the shape I was." This observation actually leads to one of the things that have been a surprise for him. Jon says he finds himself thinking in amazement, "I can actually bend that far!" He tells us that he has not only found greater flexibility, but also a renewed vigor. But, the list does not stop there. He reports that he's also discovered a new level of personal peace and tranquility.

Jon finds himself thankful for T'ai Chi and Qigong's calming influence. As a way of explaining the depth of his thanks, he says one thing, "I work in retail." He then quotes Laoshi, "The world teaches us to be tense and stressed; T'ai Chi wants us to be the opposite." In true T'ai Chi fashion, he turns the tables and tells us that his job offers him a great practice in countering the tension and stress some of his customers seem to want for him.

Aside from lessons in patience, his time at the paint store where he works offers him other opportunities to practice. He emphasizes the importance of practice and says, "Whenever I get the chance I always try something, *Ward-Off*, *Walking the Rails*, or even stretching to try and correct my mistakes." He says his practice at the store can lead to unforeseen complications, "Nothing like trying to explain to your boss why you're using *White Crane Cools Her Wings* to restock a shelf!"

Jon reports that the benefits of his practice seem too numerous to describe. He does say that a major lesson has been in the importance of finding mindfulness. As we all recognize, life in contemporary times can be about rushing around with much to do and little time to do it. Jon tells us that he has learned to be in the moment and has found that no matter how much he has to do, it all seems to get done.

Another lesson that he puts to good use is embracing questioning. Jon readily admits that there are things Laoshi tells him or shows him that he just doesn't understand. To save what he says would be hours of confusion and open the door to understanding, he questions. This openness to query was a lesson that came to him from what he considers an unlikely source. Jon shares a story about being at a gathering in California a number of years ago. He was in conversation with a man he did not know. During a break in their conversation, he was told he was talking to the head Coca-Cola. When their conversation continued, Jon confirmed what he had been told and then asked if he could ask a question. With permission, he asked for advice in finding success. The man's answer, "Never feel foolish to ask a question or to ask for help. If you ask you're only foolish for a minute. If you don't you're a fool for life."

Another piece of advice he offers does come from his time on the mat with Laoshi, "Breathe." He continues, "Breathing leads to relaxation, which in the end leads to peace and tranquility – the opposite of aggression. That's something my ole Uncle would be proud of."



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