

STUDENT PROFILE: MATTHEW J. CUNNINGHAM

By WTS Staff

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As many who become a part of the Water Tiger family, Mathew Cunningham's journey toward T'ai Chi began years before even knowing that the art even existed. He tells us that from an early age, he was very aware of his physical self and was very physically active. "My mom used to call me 'monkey'," he remembers. "I was always climbing around everything in the house and jumping off of the play-gym."

This led to an interest in riding BMX bikes when he was four: "I would practice hours and hours every day to learn a new trick."

Another layer in Matt's foundation of interest was cultivated as he explored alternative ideologies regarding spirituality after years of education in Catholic schools. He became interested in Buddhism and Taoism and found their perspectives on understanding the broader world very appealing.

It does seem as though his initial experience with T'ai Chi while in college may have been by necessity and not desire. He was attending Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey, which he describes as "a college for nerds". Matt says the college required some sort of physical education class for all students and jokes that this was about getting the nerds off their sofas and desk chairs. He says, "I took the Tai Chi/Qigong class because Archery and Badminton filled up too quickly." He quickly adds, "It ended up being very challenging and rewarding."

When asked to compare that early experience with his time in the studio now, he shares that T'ai Chi at Stevens was about choreography while Water Tiger is about so much more.

We'll let him explain how he returned to T'ai Chi a few years later:

I had a rude awakening caused by the choices and decisions I had been making for several years. Luckily, after one particular event, a light bulb turned on in my head that made me wake up and see what was really going on. I knew I needed to make positive changes in my life. My girlfriend at the time was an experienced yoga student and suggested I practice that. I had gone to at least a dozen classes at as many different studios and didn't really enjoy it because I am very stiff. I decided to look back on things from the past that had positive impacts on me — physical practices and Eastern ideologies stood out. I realized that T'ai Chi encompasses both and started looking for a place to learn.

Finding the website led to an email exchange with McElroy Laoshi. Matt says that Laoshi was distinct from the inquiries he made to other programs: "Laoshi was quick to respond and invited me to join."



Matt developed an interest in riding BMX bikes when he was four.

(Digital art BMX by David Pringle)

Matt's experience in college did set some expectations. He admits thinking that everyone in class would be doing the same thing — following from position to position. He also didn't expect that so much focus would be placed on the "how" and the "why" above the "what" of the movements.

He's had some surprises on his journey with Water Tiger that began in late-August of last year. Matt had been in class for a few weeks and received a vertical alignment correction from Laoshi. He confesses that he almost quit: "I wanted to run out the door and never come back. I felt worse than when I got a C- in chemistry in college!"

Obviously — and, happily, he made a different choice. Through his time in the studio, he'd progressed through the family of *Walking the Rails* exercises and is now drilling the details of *Ward-Off Walking* on his way learning *Grasp Sparrow's Tail to the Four Cardinal Directions*.

Another surprise came in his home practice. Matt was playing our *T'ai Chi Qigong Breathing Set* and felt the Qi flowing through his lower spine. He describes the moment: "The feeling was unlike anything I have ever felt before."

Even though Matt finds a challenge in meditation, he also finds it a favorite. He explains that no matter how poorly he feels it is unfolding that he still succeeds in reducing his stress tenfold and finds himself smiling at its closing. He also appreciates being able to practice what he wants when he wants. This has been of benefit to his sleep patterns. In his words: "I also used to have great trouble falling asleep at night due to anxiety but now after playing for about 45 minutes to an hour, I fall asleep easily with a calm mind."

This is not the only time he turns to his experience with T'ai Chi to cultivate calmness. He shares that he integrates the principles in his daily interactions. "I frequently find myself on job sites where contractors are angry or giving me a hard time," he details. "I practice yielding and equanimity in my interactions and — rarely — strike back when they are off balance! My boss often praises me for being able to keep a cool head when everyone around me is exploding."

He says he also applies body structure principles when having to work for hours on end while standing at makeshift workstations at construction sites.

His goals with Water Tiger are both simple and complex. He looks to be happy and healthy and able to channel positive energy into every aspect of his daily life. He adds that he'd like to reverse his graying hair.

When it comes to the last one, we can only suppose that he really hasn't looked very closely at Laoshi's own head of hair!



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Art by DavidChenArt.com

