

STUDENT PROFILE: CARL ELMGREN

By WTS Staff

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Although the T'ai Chi sign in the window at 29 South Ocean has changed over the years, McElroy Laoshi has always maintained that the purchase of the original sign was the best investment he has ever made in promoting the Water Tiger program in the studio. Carl Elmgren serves of yet another example of the power of window signage. Carl's journey to things Water Tiger is much, much longer than simply seeing the sign in the window, but it was the sign that led him to the website and to step onto the mat for the first time in March of this year.

Carl has been a student of the martial arts for over 50 years. His broad range of experience includes the athletic competition of Golden Gloves and collegiate football and then more boxing and football while serving in the United States Marine Corps, as well as time on the mat in Tae Kwon Do, Shotokan Karate, and Ueshiba Aikido. Aside from consistently making it into the semifinals throughout his boxing career, Carl also holds brown belts in both Tae Kwon Do and Shotokan. He discovered Aikido in the early 1970s when he saw it in action during an Australian bar fight between Army and Marine personnel. He was introduced to the fighter, with whom he remains friends. They traveled together to Japan where Carl began his training in an Osake dojo. Carl continued practicing through the years at various dojos until 2001. He tells us that he "could never find the right place" and decided to continue his training on his own.

Even with all this experience, Carl admits that he "became aware that something was amiss." He explains, "There seemed to be no respite, no harmony in all the forms. All my athletic endeavors were seemingly consumed with conquering another opponent, adding a new kata, testing for the next belt, etc." Something had stuck in his mind since the beginning of the new millennia and the end of his days working at Columbia University in the City. He had witnessed a group of people playing T'ai Chi in Riverside Park on a regular basis. He says he would often pause during his morning walks and watch them as the sun would rise over the park. His strongest memory seems to be how calm he felt just observing their play.

That memory was with him when he went with a friend to Massachusetts and the world headquarters of Yang's Martial Arts Association for a series of classes with Dr. Yang Jwing-Ming. Carl tells us that the series of ten classes over a month were more martial than Water Tiger and he remembers the caveat of Dr. Yang's teaching, "It will take you three years to remember the forms and a lifetime to learn them." Even though he reports that it felt "familiar" to have a "package" upon which to work, Carl found it frustrating that he had only glimpses of the peace he had experienced as an inactive observer over a decade ago in the City.

His time at YMAA brought the window sign that he had seen many times walking through the village he calls home into the front of his mind. He visited the website, which Laoshi is quick to point out as the next best investment he's ever made, and sent an email that found Laoshi on his annual holiday on Provinciales. Carl admits his first experiences on the mat beginning in March were full of challenges in letting go of his previous training and suspending making comparisons to the new approaches, philosophies, and teaching styles of Water Tiger.

Carl says that he really didn't have any expectations when he joined the studio. His hope is to learn as much as he can and then spend the rest of his life perfecting it. A point-of-view, he tells us, that reminds him of the 14-year-old version of himself. Although we understand Carl is talking about a



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never-ending process of honing what has been learned, Laoshi would probably still want us to dig up the quote from Stephe Watson that is a Water Tiger favorite:

No one ever does it right. It has never been done perfectly. If there even is such a possibility as perfection, we have yet to taste it. Practice now, for it is only through the practice that we discover the direction of perfection.

Carl's challenges in fulfilling this hope begin with the physical consequences of myriad injuries connected to his years of service in the USMC and include the need to "empty his cup" of his other martial experiences. Aside from the aches and pains of various breaks, pulls, sprains, etc., he finds his previous training getting in the way of what he calls the "naturalism" of T'ai Chi – or, allowing the movement to flow from and through the body and not being led by the mind. He shares, "Of all the martial arts I have practiced, the Yang-Style T'ai Chi Chuan at Water Tiger is the most visceral and requires a deeper sense of being to be a true physical manifestation of an internal reality." He quickly adds his definition of the process, "Practice, breathe, practice, breathe – on the way."



Carl seeks to allow the movement to flow from and through the body while playing *Grasp Sparrow's Tail Three-Posture Walking*.

The way Carl has chosen to practice and breathe on the mat is to be in the studio as often as possible. Though when he started he was coming to the studio twice per week, it wasn't long before he increased his attendance and is now consistently stepping onto the mat three or four times each week. He reports that his short time with Water Tiger has already manifested some tangible benefits. Not only has he been able to reduce what was a necessary three or four monthly shiatsu massage sessions to only one, but he has also seen a previously atrophied tibialis anterior muscle on the side of the shin begin to rebuild. The reconstituted muscle has resulted in a challenge to balance as his body adjusts to the newfound strength, but Carl is pleased with another result. He says, "My right foot has corrected to the point where I can wear a pair of shoes I gave up on and threw in the hall closet."

Aside from improved pain management and the weak becoming stronger, Carl continues to be surprised by the Water Tiger process that focuses on the small first. Part of him would really rather start with the broad strokes first and then refine the details. He readily admits to the frustration that comes with being a results-oriented person. However, Carl also recognizes that this step-wise process is the same he experienced when he learned to play music. According to him, "I only progressed when I went back to basics: practice scales, perfect technique, start small and progress on to more difficult pieces." He adds, "After all this, and most importantly, play with musicians who are better than me – easy to find."

On the mat, his instrument is his body. On the stage, his instrument is the mouth organ – what others call the harmonica. Carl tells us that he frequently plays a four-octave chromatic harmonica with various jazz groups in Manhattan. Like Carl's journey to T'ai Chi, there were several other aspects to his musical journey. He says, "I started out playing country and rock blues but was told I had a jazz sensitivity." We think that his jazz sensitivity will be a bonus as he continues with T'ai Chi – even if the way he holds the harmonica can sometimes cause him to hold his elbow a little too high when playing on the mat. We're sure he'll find the way to hit the right notes.

