

STUDENT PROFILE: MICHAEL KANDEL

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Originally Published June 2008

Michael Kandel places his journey to Water Tiger within the frame of his experience with exercise. That journey is complex – and not even close to being over.

He tells us that he was never really much of an athlete. In his words, “I was the bookworm weakling type.” His high school gym experience is probably typical for most of us and can be described in one word: humiliating. Michael did take up exercise when he was in his 30s – not quite half his life ago. It started with the Royal Canadian Air Force exercises developed by Bill Orban, moved to bicycling, and settled into jogging. Michael remembers, “I was doing something completely new for me and was amazed when I ran my first mile without collapsing.” He joined a running club, ran in 10Ks, marathons, and even a couple ultramarathons (usually so named when beyond the distance of a traditional marathon). Even with all the time feet were hitting pavement, he still didn’t consider himself an athlete. He does say, however, that he learned quite a bit, “I learned physical activity is good not only for body but also for mind and soul. I learned I was persistent. I learned the mind-over-matter principle: you can do impossible things simply by not giving up.”



Michael (foreground) taking a “mini-vacation” during the March 2008 seminar *Meditation 101: Pathways to Stillness*.

Shin splints and a daily commute to the City put an end to his jogging. Then there was a 15-year gap in his journey with exercise. He puts the responsibility for the next direction on his son, “Number One Son said my wife, Marjorie, and I should exercise.” As his son was wrapped up in practicing yoga, that was the modality that was suggested. “Since I listen to my son – because he’s wise – we looked around for a yoga studio in our Port Jefferson neighborhood.” They didn’t find a yoga studio, but they did find T’ai Chi with a familiar name in the Long Island T’ai Chi community, Sifu Chang. Michael tells us that a side street on this leg of his journey was with meditation. He admits he had a bit of a troubled mind from mixed sources: September 11th (he was working downtown on that bright, late-summer day), medical challenges, career challenges, his sixtieth birthday, etc. Number One Son again made a suggestion that he followed and Michael found himself part of Buddhist group at Stony Brook. He describes his experience with meditation as a mini-vacation and finds an interesting paradox in the practice. “I’ve become more aware of other people and am nicer to them – at least in my thoughts,” he says. But he wonders, “What does consideration for other people have to do with sitting by yourself in a dim room?”

Michael and Marjorie were with Sifu Chang for about seven years and, among other experiences, had completed the Standardized 24-Posture Form from Sifu’s lineage. The first thing Michael took away from his study with Sifu was the focus on the breath. He admits, “It took a few months to become easy.” As his experience with breath has deepened he has found breath and centering become the magic pill that address a myriad of issues. He explains, “I’ve found it very handy on sardine-packed subway cars when the power goes out and in airplanes when turbulence happens.” He even says that something that once plagued him, airsickness, is now a thing of the past. He also found his time with Sifu

strengthened his legs, improved his balance, and deepened his physical confidence. Unfortunately, Sifu Chang is a bit of a nomad and moved from the area. Not wanting to allow T'ai Chi to fall from his life, he found the Water Tiger ad in the Verizon Yellow Pages and followed it to the website. Laoshi tells us he remembers it was actually Marjorie who made the initial inquiry and left a voice-mail, but he found himself talking to Michael soon after Marjorie answered the return call. Michael stepped through the threshold of the studio and onto the mat for the first time at Water Tiger School on October 22, 2005.

Although several students over the years have come to the studio from other arts, e.g., Aikido, Shotokan, Tae Kwon Do, Jujitsu, etc., Laoshi says that Water Tiger hasn't really had many step on the mat from other T'ai Chi programs. "Michael was obviously disappointed that I wanted to start by introducing him to our approach from the ground up with our beginning forms," admits Laoshi. "However, he fully embraced the process and I couldn't be happier with his time in the program." Perhaps Michael's point-of-view is best explained by a story he shared with us regarding a recent contemplation:

It's connected with the stage, which I know is part of Laoshi's world. I was in a children's theatre group in Baltimore for many years — grew up in it, really. We had weekly classes and put on a few plays a year, some with semi-professional adults. As a teenager, I developed a terrible stuttering problem, so once in rehearsal I couldn't get out my lines. Not a single one — despite straining, red face, sweat. I told the director I couldn't be in the play, but she said not to worry. So there I am the night of the performance and the curtain goes up. I'm onstage, in costume and makeup, under the lights, and in front of hundreds of people. Miraculously there's no problem! I am no longer me; I am Huckleberry Finn. I was full of energy, power, and also totally relaxed. What a high that was. What I'm thinking is that when there's little or no self invested in something all kinds of difficulties fall away. Maybe you can be yourself in a deeper and better way by letting go of what we usually think of as self: our desires, our fears, our vanity.



Truly believing in letting go of personal fears, Michael (center) explores the martial applications of T'ai Chi at *World T'ai Chi & Qigong Day 2008*.

Some of what Michael had to let fall away included the differences in approaches between Laoshi and Sifu. He tells us that he was surprised that T'ai Chi and Qigong study didn't have to be dramatic and physical. He found Laoshi's approach emphasizing the internal much different than Sifu's. He was also impressed by the fusion of what he sees as all the aspects of T'ai Chi: forms, Taoism, martial applications, meditation, and health. He says, "I suspect that this balance among T'ai Chi's aspects is unusual; although people pay lip service to it in magazine articles, they don't really practice it." Even with the differences, Michael still observes, "I see the connection between what Sifu Chang taught and what Laoshi teaches." He continues, "The two are so different, and yet each in his own way is a traditionalist — and it's the same tradition after all."

It is that tradition that gives Michael his dream. He sees himself outside, with trees rustling overhead or a brook babbling nearby, and he's playing T'ai Chi. Time passes — an hour, or two. He feels great — getting a fabulous workout and, at the same time, being perfectly rested. Can traditions get any better?

