

STUDENT PROFILE: KATHY SCHWAGER

By WTS Staff

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As it is with many people, stress was the major reason she brought Kathy Schwager to T'ai Chi Ch'uan and Water Tiger School. She describes stress's influence in her life quite bluntly as "destructive" and admits that it was affecting both her mental and physical health. She says, "I kept telling myself that once the stress stops and I have time to 'catch my breath' it'll all work out and I'll be fine." She adds, "Well, that didn't happen."

Not only did her stress not fade away, it was fed by the loss of her cat to accident and the death of her father within a six-month period. Kathy was named as her father's executor. So not only did she have to cope with his death, she also had to handle closing out his estate. It was also during this time that the only member of her family still living on American soil moved to Switzerland and left her to sell his house and close any other personal business that remained open.

She realized she needed help and didn't want to turn to the pharmaceutical industry. This made her first step seeking relief fall toward the Zen Mountain Monastery in an upstate New York nature preserve located in the Catskill Mountains. She had tried meditation in the past, but with little success. It's her belief the failure was due to the fact that she thrives on learning within a structured environment. ZMM fit the bill. She says, "One of the purposes of this retreat was to not only introduce people to Buddhism, but to teach you how to properly meditate — how to get your body in proper alignment, how to breathe, etc." It was this attention to the minutia that appealed to her.



Kathy's first step seeking relief from stress fell toward the Zen Mountain Monastery in upstate New York.

Although she connected with the training, she was challenged incorporating what she had learned into her everyday life. Relief from stress was still out of reach. It was numerous recommendations from a naturopathic doctor that brought T'ai Chi to Kathy's attention. She found the idea intriguing since she has always had an underlying desire to study a martial art, and connected to certain aspects of T'ai Chi from the perspective of a Reiki practitioner. Reiki is a Japanese art that channels universal Ki (the Japanese word meaning Qi) for healing purposes. She's not the only person on the mat at Water Tiger involved in Reiki. Christine Reynolds and Mary Walsh are also practitioners.

Kathy found our website through Google and liked what she saw. She readily admits that it helped that tigers are one of her favorite animals. Since she was also able to find another T'ai Chi school only three blocks from her home in Centereach, we're happy for whatever the mixture of reasons were that brought her in the door.

When she walked into the studio on that Sunday afternoon nearly a year ago her plan was only to observe. Her words tell the story, "Something told me that being here was the right thing to do and that I should just let whatever happens happen. So I did. And I'm so glad I did." She also tells us that she decided to participate rather than watch because she thought watching would not be enough. She adds with a smile, "Once again that was the right decision because here I am."

According to Kathy, the surprise she has experienced since that first night is that she is not surprised very often. She explains, "Being as cerebral as I am, letting go of things, especially

my expectations, is often difficult, but not so with Tai Chi." She thinks this ability to let go has two sources. One source is the support of the Water Tiger family. Kathy calls her fellow students "wonderful." She also finds Laoshi a teacher that seems to know just what a student needs. The other source, she says, has something to do with the fact that being on the mat demands a complete retraining of her perspectives – her view of herself and her view of life in general. "Hers is not an uncommon experience," says Laoshi. "Many people find that their experience in T'ai Chi leads them to looking at themselves in a different mirror – one that strips away the layers we build around ourselves; and the removal of those layers change the way we look at the world around us."

That world for Kathy has changed, dramatically. "For one thing – no more anxiety," she says with a certain sense of satisfaction. "On the rare occasion where I begin to feel anxious, I breathe through it and it dissipates. It's amazing!" She shares that she's not the only one that has noticed the difference. Colleagues at the Nature Conservancy of Long Island and friends have also recognized there has been a change. She gives us the details:

I have more patience – most of the time – and noticed especially at the St. Jude's fundraiser. Even though I was rather annoyed by some of the people there, I handled them much differently than I would have had I **not** been doing T'ai Chi. I felt much more in control of myself and my temper. **That** was surprising.



Even though Kathy (in red) was annoyed by passers-by during our St. Jude fund-raiser, she was able to keep her cool.

Kathy has also learned the importance of giving herself permission. Laoshi often tells us that T'ai Chi gives us permission for different things, e.g., to slow down, to be still, to let go, to fail, etc. Kathy considers this permission fundamental to her entire experience with T'ai Chi. She wraps accepting permission into the concept of retraining her perspectives, i.e., it's something she's always found challenging and she's learning that it doesn't have to be.

Her personal journey with the arts hasn't just been with the mental / emotional side of the equation. She's also experienced the physical benefits. Kathy considers herself a very physically active person. Some of this activity is due to the requirements of her job, but some is simply because she enjoys working out and participating in physically demanding recreation, like kayaking. "Getting in and out of a kayak is so much easier if you keep your body relaxed," she observes. "The instinct to tense every muscle in your body merely makes it easier to fall out of the kayak."

Although falling out of a kayak doesn't seem to be one of them, Kathy admits that she still sees many challenges. Calming the "monkey mind" is one of them. She views her tendency to overanalyze as being good for science but bad for T'ai Chi. Finding time to practice can also be an issue. She readily admits that she can see deterioration in the patience and calm she's successfully cultivated if she finds herself skipping a few days of training.

Yet even with the challenges, Kathy remains committed to continuing – continuing to practice, continuing to cultivate calm and patience, continuing to heal, continuing to give herself permission. "I can't expect anything more or less from it," she concludes.

