

STUDENT PROFILE: RITA VALENTIN

By WTS Staff

Originally Published December 2005

Rita Valentin is the only current student at Water Tiger School to have experienced Laoshi's programs before there were classes at the studio. Her first experience with T'ai Chi and Laoshi's programs was through a public class at Blue Point's Henrietta Acampora Cottage in early 2001.

"I had just moved to Long Island and was still working full-time for Quester I.T.," says Laoshi, "and the Cottage's director had gotten my name from Patchogue Parks and Recreation after my first meetings about bringing *World T'ai Chi Day* and *T'ai Chi in the Park* to the village." He tells us that Quester allowed him to adjust his schedule to teach the class.

According to Rita, "T'ai Chi proved much harder than I expected and, after it was over, I did not keep up the practice."

By November of that year, Water Tiger School began renting space at Suffolk Aikikai. Laoshi created the first edition of the newsletter to inform those whose names and addresses he had of the classes. Rita was one such person. His persistence paid off when she joined the Friday afternoon class in September 2002. She says, "I finally got enough courage and joined." When pressed for more details on what led to her decision, she answers, "Because something had captivated me that I could not explain, but I still wanted to know what it was."

According to Rita, she had an interest in T'ai Chi before the Water Tiger School program appeared in Blue Point. She tells us that it was Bill Moyers' PBS television series "Healing and the Mind" that first cultivated this interest. In one of the segments during the series, Mr. Moyers shows Chinese people of all ages practicing T'ai Chi in a park. She admits that she was taken by the grace and harmony of the scene. In her words, "The peaceful picture stayed with me, and I knew, if there was ever a chance, I would like to try T'ai Chi."

She says, at the time she saw the series, she was exploring her longtime curiosity about Eastern philosophy and modalities through yoga classes offered through her local continuing education district. Having been born into a more traditional family in Switzerland, she confesses, "When I started, all this was foreign to me."

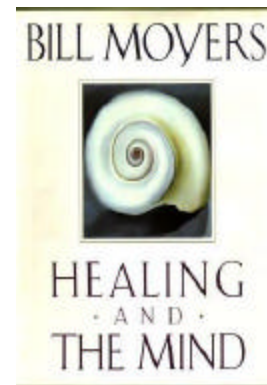
Rita tells us that she enjoys the differences between the public class at the Cottage and the classes at the studio. She is especially happy with the personal attention from Laoshi. She says, "Laoshi is a very gifted teacher, with great knowledge of martial arts, qigong, Chinese philosophy, and more." According to her, she has come to truly appreciate the concept that to understand T'ai Chi you have to experience T'ai Chi. "And that is what brings me to class every Friday, to learn about this something special called Qi, the universal life force, and the flow of yin and yang."

She has not always found this journey an easy one and admits that sometimes she feels that she wants to quit. It is in those moments that she relates to the same feelings voiced by Linda Myoki Lehrhaupt in her book *T'ai Chi as a Path of Wisdom*. Ms. Lehrhaupt also confesses to having times when she finds herself wanting to quit. She writes that it is always T'ai Chi itself that keeps bringing her back. Rita agrees.

Although she feels she could stand to increase her time with practice, Rita does not feel like missing any of her time in the studio. Her diverse duties at Timber Point Country Club in Great River sometimes call for her employer to request that she stay a little later on Friday afternoons. She tells us that she always declines.

When asked to explain her dedication, she says, "T'ai Chi, the gentle martial art, has helped me achieve balance, both physically and emotionally." She feels that T'ai Chi is everywhere and advises that all one has to do is just slow down and notice how everything works in harmony – our bodies, nature, and the universe.

She still considers herself a beginner and finds that every Friday brings new things to contemplate and cultivate. According to Laoshi, "Rita's commitment to work tirelessly on the details is a joy and a lesson to us



Rita was first introduced to T'ai Chi through the Bill Moyers series *Healing and the Mind* that was broadcast a few years ago on PBS.

all." He says that he believes that she seems to truly understand the Wushu maxim that tells us the student must "be willing to taste the bitter."



Rita playing *Wave Hands Like Clouds* at The Common Ground in Rotary Park during the August 21, 2005, event.

Since joining the program, Rita has hardly ever missed a Saturday morning in the park during the summer. This year she also made each of the three Sunday mornings at The Common Ground in Sayville. She feels that there is a great difference to be experienced in playing T'ai Chi and Qigong in the open by the water or in the grove, while breathing the fresh air, and sharing the space with the birds as they fly over the group. It is in this setting that she believes that we can connect with the concept that "we are part of this microcosm called the universe."

Rita tells us that she has always felt a connection to the *Song of the Real Meaning* that Laoshi had included on the syllabus for the class at the Cottage. He still includes it on every syllabus for his introductory public classes. The credited author is the Taoist Li Dao Zi who lived through the Tang and Ming Dynasties, AD 618 – 644. Although he predates T'ai Chi and was a Long Fist (*Lian Bu Quan*) martial artist, his writing is considered part of the *T'ai Chi Classics*. From Rita's point-of-view, "I believe it expresses an aspect of the universe – of existence – of our lives."

Given her affinity for the thoughts and images they provoke, we think that it is appropriate to end Rita's profile with Li Dao Zi's words:

No shape, no shadow.
Entire body transparent and empty.
Forget your surroundings and be natural.
Like a stone chime suspended from West Mountain.
Tigers roaring, monkeys screeching.
Clear fountain, peaceful water.
Turbulent river, stormy ocean.
With your whole being, develop your life.

