

STUDENT PROFILE: PETER WASHINGTON

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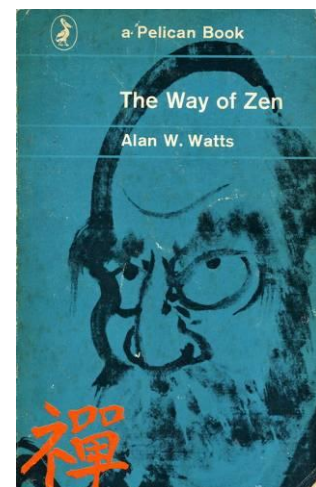
Peter Washington is a resident of Patchogue and the 176th student to set foot on the mat at 29 South Ocean. The journey that led to that step began a little over 40 years ago. He was a tween and a teen during the 1960s and found himself studying Eastern religions and philosophies. They were caught in the current of the counter culture revolution that carried into the 1970s and, as part of the “journey within” movement, interest in them deepened. Peter’s initial contact with Eastern thought was through the books of Alan Watts on Zen. It was much later in his life that this initial interest began to lead him to the martial arts.

Over the past few years, Peter has had opportunities to experience T’ai Chi. On three separate occasions, he tells us, he has joined classes. However, as often happens, he found the demands of everyday life intruding and pulling him out of his study. Peter speaks very highly of one of those three experiences. His workplace provided an opportunity to study with Master Jesse Two Owls Teasley, whose school is based in Nassau County. “I’ve seen Master Teasley in action,” says McElroy Laoshi. “It’s easy to understand why Peter’s experience with him struck a chord.” Some may recall hearing Laoshi describing Master Teasley demonstrating the Jian at the 2003 World T’ai Chi & Qigong Day event at Central Park in the City. “He was holding the sword above his head while standing on his right leg with his left extended in a kick.” But this wasn’t the end. “He held both sword and leg parallel to the ground while he lowered himself into a single-leg squat all the way down to the ground and rising back up to step into the next posture.” Peter admits it was distance this time and not life that interfered with his study. Though, he found the experience seriously deepened his desire to learn the art of T’ai Chi.

Peter’s desire led him to register for a 10-week class sponsored by Patchogue-Medford Continuing Education. The class was led by our own Si-Suk Paul Adago, Jr. Says Peter, “Once again I was in T’ai Chi class; and, once again, the instructor impressed me.” He continues, “Adago Si-Suk has obvious skills and abilities in the martial arts, but I was really more impressed by his sincerity.” Peter felt that Paul gave the students in the room his best so that they could get the most out of their short time together. “I began to think what Water Tiger School might be like based on Paul’s class,” Peter tells us. “I had high expectations and high hopes for my study when I joined the school.” He has found that his intuition was beyond spot on.

In meeting Peter’s expectation of instruction that focuses on the student and that seeks to cultivate all that the art of T’ai Chi Ch’uan has to offer, Water Tiger has succeeded in surpassing the level of satisfaction he has held from his previous experiences. He tells us he finds that our offering creates more connection and flow in the lessons from class to class. His time on the mat is described as being “like one continuous thing being created” rather than little bits and pieces that need to be put together. And, he admits, that this time his commitment to home practice has increased and seems to be reinforcing the connection and flow of his lessons in the studio.

One of the things Peter says has surprised him about his lessons is about the sense of community on the mat. He explains, “For someone who has studied T’ai Chi before you would think it would be obvious that it is not really a solitary practice.” He has discovered that there is far more interaction between teacher and students and even between students and other students. Peter notes a recent experience, playing the four postures of Grasp



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Sparrow's Tail as a walking exercise, was the first time he ever felt that he was "really playing T'ai Chi with my fellow students – instead of just trying to keep up." He believes other specific aspects of our time on the mat add deepening the feeling of interplay, citing for examples our group meditation, the T'ai Chi Qigong Breathing Set, and the week of Push Hands at the end of every month.

Regardless of this breakthrough for Peter, he still feels that he brings very little to the table himself beyond "comic relief". Laoshi understands. He shares, "That's the way it usually unfolds for someone who's new to the studio experience." He continues, "We feel clunky at first and find that we hold more questions than answers." Under these circumstances, Laoshi believes one cannot help but feel awkward and inadequate. "But," he says with a smile, "even a journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step." From Laoshi's perspective, having someone new on the mat not only reminds everyone of their first steps, it also helps remind those who have a few more steps on their own journey regarding the importance of the movement details, of mindfulness, of the foundational principles of T'ai Chi. As Peter tells us that his fellow students have been very thoughtful and generous with him, Laoshi tells us that Peter has added depth to the journeys of everyone else who shares the mat with him.



Peter (L) playing the four postures of *Grasp Sparrow's Tail* as a walking exercise and feeling as if he's really playing with his fellow students.

To deepen his own understanding of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Peter is currently rereading some of the books he has read over the years. He has found his return to writings of Chang San-Feng and Wang Tsung Yueh in the T'ai Chi Classics, which are available in various book and essay formats, particularly interesting. He describes them seeming as deeply rooted as an old tree that still remains so very much alive. Peter hopes that his time with the written word will help his practice.

He has found that his time with his practice has improved his feeling of well-being. He credits some of this feeling to simply knowing that he's doing something to improve his health. Peter's hope, shared by many people, is that T'ai Chi will not only extend his life, but also keep him vital.

Something else that keeps him vital is his love of music. Not only does he collect, he tells us that he has seen more concerts than he could possibly remember. He believes this interest was another that was cultivated by being around in the 1960s when "some of the very best musicians started playing". He is quick to add that he's not stuck in the music of the past and his collecting extends to many of today's indie bands.

As in the past, however, Peter again finds that time is presenting a challenge to his life with T'ai Chi. Although he is not allowing it to keep him off the mat, he admits that he has difficulty fitting daily practice into his schedule. In talking about challenges, Peter admits that his family helped him break through the procrastination that was keeping him from joining Water Tiger after completing the short-term class with Paul. His wife and two daughters had been pushing him to do something for himself, but the push became a shove when his eldest daughter purchased a gift certificate during the 2008 holiday season. Since he didn't join us until August 2009, we can only guess that the shove took a little time to reverberate to action.

Something that reverberates with us is what Peter cites as his current goal. He tells us that he doesn't want to lose his "beginner's mind". Although he would like to someday explore Qigong and wants to expand his experience in the martial arts, Peter says, "I would like to continue slowly soaking in my current study with a ready mind and to be open to the teaching as it comes."

