

STUDENT PROFILE: MARK WILLIAMS

By WTS Staff

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Mark Williams, who calls East Yaphank home, joined the Water Tiger School family in January 2007. It was actually his wife, Debby, who pointed him in the direction of Patchogue when he began to seriously consider beginning a T'ai Chi program. She and a friend, Nora, had participated in one of Laoshi's library classes and remembered where the program was based. As an example of how small the world can be, it is interesting to note that Nora has been on the mat at 29 South Ocean to participate in the offerings of Suffolk Aikikai.

He found the website and picked up the phone. "I remember when Mark first called that he said something about 'coming down and seeing what it's all about,'" recalls Laoshi. "We went back and forth a little about what 'seeing what it's all about' could mean." It meant that Mark wanted to experience a class; and he did so just a few days later.

Mark tells us that it is the health benefits that cultivate his interest in T'ai Chi. He did have a little experience before stepping on the mat, but it was through a video presentation.

Though he appreciated the gift, he found learning via video did not serve and he put off his desire to learn the art for a bit. His interest was rekindled as he began to recognize that he needed something to put him on a better path to health and wellness. He explains, "I had reached a point in my life where I began to realize that I wasn't getting any younger and that which at one time was simple had now become difficult." Recognizing that he needed to bring back movement and some form exercise back into his life, he saw T'ai Chi as "a kinder, gentler way" to bring about some needed improvements into his life.



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Mark tells us that his interest in the martial arts was cultivated by watching *Kung Fu* and the movies of Bruce Lee and that T'ai Chi isn't the only martial experience that he's had in his life. He took a Shotokan Karate class for credit while he was in college 25 years ago. He tells us that the instructor not only spoke solely in Japanese, but he also conducted class in a very traditional way. Although he found the classes difficult, he connected. By the time the class ended, Mark had progressed to the point of being ready for his first belt test. "Had I been able to find a Shotokan program," he admits, "I may well have continued my study."

He can't help but compare the previous experience with his time on the mat with us. "I like the traditional aspect of the Water Tiger approach, he says, "the opening and closing bow, the respect for the kwoon, the protocol on the mat." He adds that he does find the atmosphere at Water Tiger a little more laid back with such things as laughing and joking that weren't part of the more serious approach of his Shotokan instructor.

One of the things he first missed when he walked in the door was a uniform. He recalls, "I looked forward to wearing something like the people wore in the old Celebex commercial with the dog that joins them in the park to do T'ai Chi." He has since discovered that sweats and a t-shirt make a perfectly good uniform. He appreciates the flexibility the casual wear offers by being able to wear less when the temperatures raise and more when they drop. Regardless, he might still say under his breath that a uniform might actually be something he still misses. Although there are some programs where uniforms are a part of the studio decorum, they are not customarily a part of the traditional approach of the Chinese martial

arts. Laoshi explains, "The 'wu zhuong' (martial outfit) is what we see on television and in the movies and is what I might wear for formal events or for demonstrations, but the traditional clothing in the patriarchal history of the Chinese Martial arts was simply trousers and no shirt." We don't think that would quite serve the students at 29 South Ocean.

Mark's initial response to our question about what has been a surprise was a simple statement, "What hasn't been a surprise?" Aside from coming to terms with the lack of uniform, Mark has been surprised by the import of fundamentals and the paradox that is the easiness and difficulty of T'ai Chi. Probably because his exposure to T'ai Chi was through seeing form, Mark did not expect Laoshi's focus would be on the fundamentals and not simply playing form. What he has discovered is that the former is absolutely essential for the latter. He also finds T'ai Chi "easy enough for someone who can barely walk around the block and yet challenging enough for someone in great physical shape." He finds that the degree of ease or difficulty is determined by the focus of the play. He explains, "It all depends on your current level of understanding and current physical ability." His experience has taught him that the play can be challenged by simply taking a deeper stance or by bringing the focus to the art's internal principles. "I believe the internal challenge is the most difficult and most rewarding part of learning a form, a posture, or an exercise," he admits.

Mark's favorite part of being on the mat is that there are people with him. "I know that I don't have the tenacity to practice on my own," he confesses. "I really like to be able to work and play with others." He tells us that his practice off the mat doesn't include any type of formal schedule. It is usually finding moments through the day to run a form or focus on a posture. Mark explains, "A lot of time I will find myself doing a posture or some of the T'ai Chi Qigong Breathing Set at work. Sometimes it's because I have a few moments of down time and or more often it's because I want to loosen up before or after doing a strenuous task." He feels committing a little time to warming up or cooling down helps to prevent injury during and mitigate strain after.



Mark (L) really likes to work and play with others – in this case applying a Chin Na application on fellow student Ed Merchant during a recent seminar.

Mark's dedication to practicing when he can seems to be working for him. Even though he continues to be challenged by various range-of-motion issues and by making the adjustments those issues make necessary, he feels his experience has improved his mobility. But, the list doesn't stop there. Other improvements he lists include balance, coordination, stamina, speed and a greater sense of peace. He has also lost 50 pounds since joining Water Tiger and can once again touch the floor in a bending stretch!

We're not sure if any of these improvements will help Mark brew better mead, but we're intrigued with this little tidbit about him. Mead is, more or less, wine made from honey. Mark began brewing 10 years ago and now usually aims to brew one or two batches every year. He tells us that the process takes about six months from start to bottle.

Mark isn't so task-oriented with T'ai Chi. His goal is simply to continue the journey that began on that January evening in 2007. He explains, "I want to be able to play well into my later years, to be able to move, and to have a better quality of life than I did before I stepped onto the mat." We agree with him when he tells us that he feels he is well on his way to seeing those things come to fruition.

