

## TIGER'S LAIR: 10 YEARS ON SOUTH OCEAN By WTS Staff

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It was the first Thursday evening in November 2001 when McElroy Laoshi first stepped through the door and onto the mat at 29 South Ocean. There were no students that first week. By the next Thursday, there were three. That number — more or less — held for two months before the next wanderer came through the door. It's been quite a journey for the last ten years. November 1, 2001, was only the beginning.

As we've previously reported (March 2009), Monteleone Sensei first invited Laoshi to use the space at *World T'ai Chi & Qigong Day 2001*. At that time, there was no plan to take Water Tiger to such a level. The plan changed when the job market evaporated later in the year on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

"I remember that first night vividly," recalls Laoshi. "I had never set foot in the studio before." He tells us that both Monteleone Sensei were there to greet him. "It was nice to have the support," he admits. "They were very kind with words of support and assurance that the students would come."

After the Sensei left, Laoshi — being Laoshi — chose to fill the time with solo practice. He confesses that in that moment he felt his world collapse. Laoshi explains, "Those first moments on the mat brought tears to my eyes — I couldn't see how it would be possible to teach T'ai Chi on the mat. I thought I had made a horrible mistake." As he continued to practice regardless of the challenge, he relaxed, sunk into the mat, and realized his world was just fine.

There have been other challenges over the last ten years, but Water Tiger continues to thrive at 29 South Ocean. "I'll admit that there have been times I've thought it was time to pack up my toys and go home," says Laoshi. "But, those thoughts are usually pretty fleeting since the challenges are always outweighed by the shared experiences with those that have joined their journeys with that of Water Tiger."

There have been 206 pairs of feet on the mat over the years. Before the Great Recession, the roster was sitting at a few short of 30 people, which isn't bad for a Long Island martial arts studio that offers only T'ai Chi and Qigong. There are currently 14 students in the regular program and one active private student. Laoshi tells us that there's a second private student that is taking time off the mat to heal. "I might not be able to recall each of the 206 people that have been on the mat," admits Laoshi. "I will say that each have added to my experience as a teacher and have added to the journeys of those around them." Some have contributed in a more tangible fashion than others. There are certain phrases that are used at Water Tiger that were first uttered by students. There are the words of advice from Francesca DeStefano (2004-2009), "When you can't get it together, take it apart." There is the respectful admonishment from Matt Kinzel (2002-2005), "Laoshi, that's one Post-it® note too many." Those two are only the tip of the iceberg.

"I recall the lesson of another warm rebuke from a student that I just referenced the other night at a public class," shares Laoshi. He tells us the story of working with senior students one evening and noticing that a junior student was standing at the wall and watching. "I called her on it with words like 'you should be working' and she replied, 'Laoshi, I am.'" That student was Patricia Hsieh, who is still working and has been working since 2002.

Terri Dillman's time on the mat (2004-2005) resulted to two favorite stories that Laoshi shares from time to time in support of the challenges faced by other students. Terri is well-remembered for her "instructor syndrome" — freezing when realizing that Laoshi is watching. "Terri would be at one end of the studio and I would be at the other," recalls Laoshi. "I'd be facing away from where she was playing and would



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casually turn to catch a glimpse of how she was doing.” He reports there would be no time before he’d hear, “Laoshi, please quit looking at me.” The other story about Terri is how she had major balance issues when she first started on *Walking the Rails*. One evening she was playing with a senior student and he asked why she held her hands behind her back. She answered, “That’s where Laoshi holds his.” The student suggested that she move her hands to one of the other choices. She did and all of her balance issues went away.

Fond memories of those that are no longer on the mat bring to mind the question of why they left. “People leave for various reasons,” Laoshi answers. Those reasons could be anything from the challenges of the mat and the climate-control of the studio to Laoshi’s teaching style and the challenges of the arts of T’ai Chi and Qigong. He reminds us that he holds the words of Mencius close to his heart:

In setting myself up as a teacher, I do not go after anyone who leaves, nor do I refuse anyone who comes. So long as he comes with the right attitude of mind, I accept him. That is all.

He admits that he does usually send a letter when someone ends their attendance without notice. It includes a reference to Mencius and a notice that he’d be willing to hear the reason(s) for the choice if the person is willing to share. He acknowledges, “I can count the number of responses I’ve received on one hand.”

Whatever the reason that drives someone to leave, we certainly don’t believe it’s the space itself. Aside from the challenges mentioned above with the softness of the mat and the range of temperature from summer into winter, the space couldn’t be more inviting. The wonderful woodwork completed by Monteleone Sensei Deb adds a great deal to the soul of the studio. “I’ve always dug the simplicity of the setting,” shares Laoshi. “It puts the focus where it belongs — on the art, on the lesson, on the experience of the journey.”



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The journey of Water Tiger at 29 South Ocean has had many twists and turns since November 2001. The large sign in the window — removed due to a change in village codes — has been replaced with a smaller sign. Classes were first offered on only Sunday and Thursday evenings. Even as the offering expanded in 2002, a number of the offered classes stood empty for a number of years. Laoshi admits manifesting an internal groan when Brian Fuschillo (2004-2005) asked for the 6AM Tuesday class to begin meeting soon after he joined the studio. It was also not until 2004 that the Qigong class and the T’ai Chi as a Martial Art class both began meeting. It wasn’t until 2005 and the efforts of Francesca DeStefano that Water Tiger had a website it could call its own. “We did have a limited web presence through ByRegion.net,” notes Laoshi. With the final transition of website maintenance from Francesca to Laoshi last November, the site is moving toward being as live as such a site can be. Laoshi reports that there are only a few pages remaining to be rebuilt. He does ask for patience, however, as rebuilding one of them, the school’s gallery, is a complicated process. Adding to Water Tiger’s web presence, the school’s Facebook presence launched in May of last year. “I like to tell people that if they ‘like’ the page they’ll get a daily message from me — a plus to some and not to others,” says Laoshi with a grin.

It is to Laoshi that we turn for the final summary of Water Tiger’s ten years at 29 South Ocean:

Like any journey, this one has had its ups and downs. But everything that has happened — good or bad — has been another thread woven into the tapestry that is Water Tiger. We can’t pull a single thread without the entire tapestry unraveling. The successes, the failures, the joy, the anger — all of it has formed what Water Tiger is today. I cannot imagine that we would be the family we are today without our home on the mat at Suffolk Aikikai.

