

The Daily Helping Episode 292:
Steven Washington

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:00:30] Hello and welcome to The Daily Helping with Dr. Richard Shuster, food for the brain, knowledge from the experts, tools to win at life. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. Whoever you are, wherever you're from and whatever you do, this is the show that is going to help you become the best version of yourself. Each episode you will hear from some of the most amazing, talented and successful people on the planet who followed their passions and strive to help others. Join our movement to get a million people each day to commit acts of kindness for others. Together, we're going to make the world a better place. Are you ready? Because it's time for your daily helping.

Thanks for tuning into this episode of The Daily Helping podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. And I am honored to share our guest with you today. His name is Steven Washington. He's the author of Recovering You, Soul Care and Mindful Movement for Overcoming Addiction. And if you're listening to this, you're saying, I don't have a drug problem. Listen, this is going to be so illuminating whether you are overcoming addiction yourself or know somebody who's overcoming addiction, Steven's wisdom is applicable to anybody. And I'm so excited to share it with you today.

He is a former professional dancer who performed on Broadway and is The Lion King, and his love of movement inspired him to become the highly acclaimed Qi Gong and Pilates teacher that he is today. He enjoys a life of joyful recoveries, passionate about helping others. And he hosts a monthly Heart Mind Moments YouTube series with videos on physical, emotional and spiritual health, and his work has been viewed by over a million people. I can't wait for you to experience it, too. Steven, welcome to The Daily Helping. It is wonderful to have you with us today.

Steven Washington: [00:02:29] Thanks for having me, Dr. Richard. Lovely to meet you.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:02:32] Absolutely.

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Steven Washington: [00:02:33] I'm really enjoying your energy, by the way.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:02:35] Thank you. I'm going to tell my wife you said that. That's good stuff. So, I'm so interested because everybody loves The Lion King, of course, so we have to talk about that, but let's go back in time. Let's because you obviously are in a very different path than you probably thought you would be when you were performing on Broadway. So, let's hop into the Steven Washington time machine. Let's go back and tell us kind of your superhero origin story. I want to hear what puts you on the path you're on today.

Steven Washington: [00:03:09] So interesting. Well, thank you for that question. Yes, I did do The Lion King. Did that show for about, gosh, somewhere between nine and I think eight or eight or ten years. I can't remember exactly. The further I get away from it, the less clear it is in my head, but almost a decade I did that show and I started doing it in 2001. From a very young age, I loved movement, I love creativity. I was the kid who would dance around the living room, put music on and just dance and lose myself, which is a great thing. I think it was one of my first coping tools that I learned, that I gathered, and I didn't even know that that's what I was doing. But dance and creative expression was something that helped me because I was a very sensitive kid. I grew up in a very chaotic, very traumatic environment with my family.

And I was a nervous kid. I used to bite my nails and trying so many different ways to just make myself feel better in my body. And movement was definitely one of those things that helped me to do that. Like I said, it was a crazy, crazy upbringing. And my family was nuts and they were all trying their best to survive. And I think one of the ways that they survived was to drink and to use drugs and to self-sue for themselves. And I remember at the age of 15, having my first drink and feeling like I was suddenly okay in the world, like I could suddenly breathe, I could suddenly exhale. And I felt like I could connect with people. And I basically chased that for 20 some odd years, that same feeling of okayness. And I did that for a long time until it didn't work anymore.

And in the midst of all that, I managed to have a really great and successful dance career in New York. I danced in small dance companies, and I eventually made my way to the Broadway stage and did The Lion King. It was the only show that I had ever saw

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on stage that I could immediately see myself in it. I could envision it, and that was pretty amazing. And I remember going to the audition on a whim, making it down to the last 5 to 10 guys out of 150. Didn't get the job, but walked out of that audition feeling so damn proud of myself because I didn't know if I could do it that morning, if I could actually muster up the courage to do it, and I did it. And it didn't matter that I didn't get the job. But then a year later, they called me and asked me to come back for an audition and I thought I was going to walk into a similar situation. It was just me. It was just me. And within two weeks I was on a plane to Toronto, Ontario, and I joined the the Canadian cast of The Lion King and eventually made my way to Broadway.

But it was a tricky time for me because I was actively drinking and doing drugs, and I was in probably one of the most stressful periods of my career at that time. I didn't know how to manage it all. And eventually, I had really reached my bottom and I had gotten to the point where I couldn't imagine another day of drinking or doing drugs, and I also couldn't imagine another day without doing it. And luckily, I had a friend who was in recovery who was just a shining light, a beacon of light. He was just such an amazing example of how to live a good life and a healthy life and to not drink.

And so, I went to him, and I was very honest about what was happening. And he took me to my first recovery meeting. And the rest is kind of history. And I've been sober for the last a little over 20 years. But what I can say is that the practices that I teach in Recovering You are things that came into my life, the majority of the things that came into my life about ten years sober, I was in grad school for Chinese medicine. I thought that that's what I wanted to do. I was so certain that that's what I was supposed to do with my life going forward after I left dance. And I got there, I moved all the way to California to do it. And I got there only to realize that that's not what I was meant to do. That's not what I wanted to do. But I was terrified because I had this thought in my mind that when you make a decision to do something, you can't change your mind. We can always change our mind. But I had a very rigid way of viewing my life and viewing the world.

And so, it set me into the spiral of panic and shame and worry and anxiety. And one of the things that began to give me relief was that Qi Gong that I began to learn in the program. And what it did for me was it helped me to energize my body and calm down those turbulent emotions I was feeling. And also, to quiet my mind because my mind

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was going a thousand miles a minute. I was in fight or flight. And Qi Gong has the amazing ability to help me and everyone to self-soothe and self-regulate. And once I had that experience, I knew that, oh, this is something I'm going to do for the rest of my life. And I'm going to share this with other people because it's something that we could all do, and we can all tap into the healing powers that exist within us. And that's basically what led me to here to this moment of writing the book and having this beautiful conversation with you about it.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:09:01] Well, thank you for sharing that, Steven. We're going to talk about the book in a little bit, but there's something you said that I'm curious. You were going down this path of learning Chinese medicine and then had this kind of crisis because you realize that's not what you were meant to do. What caused that realization?

Steven Washington: [00:09:22] I just when I walked into that environment, into that school, I suddenly felt triggered. I felt triggered by trauma from the past of being in school before and not being able to manage the experience, not feeling good enough, not feeling as though I belonged, not feeling as though I was smart enough. All those things that your mind tells you that you can't do or that you can do, and it overwhelmed me. It overwhelmed me. And it felt like it was possibly going to be something that would make me drink again if I didn't figure out a way to get past it. So, that's basically what it was for me.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:10:14] I think there's a bit of an irony in that. You steered away from Chinese medicine, but Qi Gong shares many principles there within. What led you to Qi Gong?

Steven Washington: [00:10:27] Well, it was part of the program at the Chinese medicine school. And it's not a very far jump for me being a dancer and being a Pilates instructor, to find some sort of resonance with a movement practice. And I immediately took to the practice because I felt results almost instantaneously. It almost immediately calmed me down because I would walk into the class, all my classes, feeling nervous, feeling anxious, feeling overwhelmed. And every time I began to breathe deeply at the beginning of the practice, and then to slowly move my body with awareness and notice how I was breathing and really tried to guide the energy through my body with my mind,

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I felt better. I felt better. And that was a revelation for me because nothing had quite done that same thing for me. Dance did a little bit, but there was something very different about this mindful movement practice of Qi Gong. And so, that's what drew me to it and encouraged me to pursue it beyond my time in Chinese medicine school.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:11:40] We've talked about Qi Gong once on another episode of the show, and I think it was a couple of years ago. So, if anybody hasn't heard that or they're new to Qi Gong, as many people are here listening to this, I'm sure, give us a Qi Gong 101, Steven.

Steven Washington: [00:12:00] Okay. Qi Gong 101. Here we go. So, Qi Gong is an ancient Chinese health care system that combines flowing movement, standing postures, deep breathing and focused intention to activate, cultivate, and circulate life force energy. And life force energy is basically the energy that makes our heart beat and helps to power every aspect of our being a body, mind and spirit. When you take the word Qi Gong and there are multiple spellings for that word, qi means energy and breath and gong means work or skill. So, the practice of Qi Gong is a practice of becoming more skillful at managing our own energy. And it's a practice that is available to each and every one of us, no matter what your experience with it, no matter what your physical abilities are or limitations. It's a very adaptable movement modality, and it's something that could just benefit everyone, especially when it comes to stress management.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:13:05] So, it's interesting because to me, I've always felt that Qi Gong is kind of a blend of a bunch of things. It's kind of got some elements that are very much like yoga movements. It's got meditative qualities to it. It's got breathwork to it, but it also has these forms of motion that remind me of karate. It feels like it's a lot of these different disciplines put into a blender is what it feels like.

Steven Washington: [00:13:34] Well, I think that there are different focuses for Qi Gong. There are some practices, some styles of Qi Gong that focus more on the martial arts. So, fighting combat, hand-to-hand. Then there's also another segment that focuses on health and wellbeing. And then there's also a segment that focuses on spirituality. So, there's thousands of different types of Qi Gong, and they're all as unique as the people who practice them and who teach them and who develop them.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:14:10] So, somebody is listening to this and they're thinking to themselves, okay, this sounds really cool, but I don't know if I want to learn hand-to-hand combat or the other. Like how does one go and kind of discern the differences between the Qi Gong styles or find the right one for them?

Steven Washington: [00:14:27] Well, the thing is, for instance, there are different styles that, of course, that are more more about fighting or self-defense, and those things condition the body in a certain way, but most are more about wellness, more about overall health and wellbeing. And a lot of them kind of combine all three aspects, not just focuses on one. For instance, the teachers that I studied with, what they offer, much like what I teach, is a blend of all of that.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:15:06] So, talk to us a little bit about the flavor of Qi Gong, the Washington or I guess it's Washingtonian Qi Gong, isn't it? So, tell us about your Qi Gong.

Steven Washington: [00:15:17] Well, I was trained by Lee Holden, who was a very well-known Qi Gong instructor. And one of the things that drew me to Lee was that he made the practice very accessible, very friendly to folks living in Western cultures and I really like that. I like the way that he teaches it with a level of humor. And I think that that's just fun and really accessible. So, that's kind of how I teach because I am a certified Lee Holden teacher, but I've also studied with Robert Peng, and I've also studied with Dr. Roger Jahnke. And so, I pull from a lot of different people, in Kenneth Cohen, because there are a lot of wonderful teachers out there, a lot of wonderful Qi Gong masters. And I'm a big proponent of just taking what you need and what resonates with you from multiple sources and just making it your own and making it something that's useful to me. And I think what I bring to my students is a practice that's useful for them as well.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:16:25] Wonderful. So, I want to shift gears a little bit. We said we were going to come back to the book, and we are right now. So, I'm curious. Tell us, though, how long you had been doing that Qi Gong and then when did the light bulb go off for you that, oh, I need to write this book *Recovering You*?

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Steven Washington: [00:16:44] Well, I was first introduced to Qi Gong in 2014 and I began to practice it then. And it really helped me tremendously in my recovery and just in my life in general. I didn't formally begin to teach it until I met my husband, Lee Harris, who is an energy intuitive and musician and speaker. And we went on a tour of many different cities and countries around the world. And we went to Australia, and I brought Qi Gong to the workshops that he taught. And that was the first time I had ever taught the material. I wasn't even certified at the time, but I studied the practice and because I taught movement and other forms for so many years, I knew that I could teach it, and I knew that I could use what I learned in Chinese medicine school as a foundation for it. And then after that, I began to study it even more and eventually became certified.

But like I said, it had been a part of my recovery because it just it helped me so much. It took me to where I needed to go at that point in my recovery, which is about 10 plus years into being sober. And that led me in 2018, to create an online course where I basically taught a lot of the material that's in the book. And I knew at that point when I was creating that course that this was the beginning of the conversation I was going to have with people about these practices and how they could help anyone in recovery. But not even just help people in recovery, also help people who love people who are in recovery because we're all affected by addiction and recovery. It's just so pervasive.

So, it wasn't until 2020, during the pandemic, where I had the opportunity to have a conversation with New World Library about writing a book. And what came to mind as a great subject for the book was this material. And in the middle of the night, I came up with the idea of Recovering You. And then I set forth to put all this information down on paper and to really refine the tools that I share in the book in a way that would be accessible and digestible and applicable to many different people.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:19:15] Well, I think that's so salient because, yes, even if we are not in recovery, there's a good chance we know somebody's in recovery. But the tools that you've created in this book really would be applicable to anybody who's dealing with stress and challenges in their life. So, I love the title recovery, the subtitle Soul Care and Mindful Movement. So, this is the Qi Gong piece, right? This is the Washingtonian Qi Gong, right? It's the mindful movements in a way that helps kind of recalibrate the body so that you don't have to perhaps succumb to substances or

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alcohol as a means of dealing with emotional distress. Is that what we're talking about here?

Steven Washington: [00:20:06] Well, the Soul Care is, yes, the movement is the pillar of the work. But there are so many other practices in the book that tend to the health and the well-being of the body, the mind and the spirit. So, I think that they all work well together. And I believe that in any kind of recovery, we have to just cast a wide net and gather as many different tools as we possibly can in order to help us to live a better life, healthier life, and more empowered way of being. And I think of the practices in this book movement being, again, the pillar is just one facet of a person's recovery program for themselves. I talk about 12-step recovery in the book a bit, and 12-step has helped many different people. It's not for everyone, but it's provided me with a great foundation in which to build upon. So, I always recommend that people take what's in the book, but also add it to another multiple approaches in order to really meet their needs in terms of recovering from addiction.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:21:28] Let's talk about the Soul Care element, because whether you're in addiction or not, everybody can use some of that. So, talk to us about some of the tools and strategies that one would utilize to take charge of their souls, not the right expression, but to soothe their soul, maybe that's the better expression.

Steven Washington: [00:21:48] Well, I think everything in the book that I teach is soul care, because it tends to the body, the mind and the spirit. And those three parts of our selves cannot be separated. They're all connected and intertwined and interdependent. And the body is the foundation for the emotions and for the mind and the spirit. So, everything in the book tends to that, whether it is the community building that I established in the book, the journaling, the compassionate inquiry, the very accessible in the moment exercises that people can do to begin to pick apart their fears or their sense of isolation or the shame that they feel or being able to come up with a plan of action for when they feel triggered or looking at their social support network. Do they have people around them who can help them to make their lives better? Because no one can get through this life alone, we all need help. We all need support. And people who are dealing with addiction, especially need support and need to have a vibrant social support network.

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And I also wrap up the book by talking about gratitude and how important gratitude is to our overall health and wellbeing. Because when we focus on what's wrong, most of the time we get more of what's wrong. And when we focus our minds on what we already have and what we have that we can be grateful for, it helps us to cultivate more things to be grateful for. And then also developing a faith like faith in ourselves, which is hard to do when you've disappointed yourself over and over again because of addiction. You said that you're not going to do A, B or C, and you do because you feel this compulsion, you feel this powerlessness over it, how to build trust back in yourself eventually, and then also trust in a power greater than yourself, whatever that is, for the individual. So, all of that together tends to the health and wellbeing of your soul.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:24:03] You had mentioned, and I know that there's many of them, but you had mentioned some of these little quick tools that people can do in the moment if they're feeling anxiety or shame or feeling isolated. Share one or two of those tools with us right now so that people listening to this could implement them right away if they had to.

Steven Washington: [00:24:25] Well, one of the things that I thought was really important about how to present this material to the reader was to lay a foundation for self-care from the very beginning. So, practicing self-care and addiction recovery is probably the second chapter in the book. And I felt like that's really important because A, we all need to take care of ourselves. Taking care of ourselves is our full-time job and our commitment to it ebbs and flows over time, but it's something that we all need to do and very few of us do enough of it or do it well. So, I wanted to provide just simple practices that one can do, starting with the breath, connecting to your breath. We all take countless numbers of breaths each and every day to nourish our body. Many of us don't do it well. A lot of us walk around holding our breath, which creates tension in the body. And just being able to connect to your breath, to be able to connect to your breath to bring a certain level of presence. We often focus a lot of our attention on the past or on the future. So, the past with regret, and the future with sometimes fear or worry or anxiety, but connecting to the breath brings us right to the present moment.

When you couple that with self-massage, I teach that in the book as well, that brings us to a level of presence and self-care. And I think that's really important and something that's accessible. Self-massage is something that we all intuitively do. When we have a

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headache, we tend to bring our hands to our temples, and we rub our head. That's just a very primitive, simple way that we engage with one part of our body, with another, in order to bring about some sort of relief. So, this just applies some level of intention, intentionality around self-soothing and self-regulating.

And then just meditation. I talk about meditation, how important meditation and mindfulness are in self-care. And meditation sometimes for some people it can be a very intimidating thing. They think that they have to sit cross-legged for at least 20 minutes and chant and transform themselves and transport themselves in a way but it can be much simpler than that. I remember being at a 12-step meeting at the beginning of my sobriety and someone said meditation for them is as simple as turning the hot water on for coffee in the morning and just sitting and breathing and being quiet for the five minutes it takes for the water to boil. That's a wonderful way to start.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:27:08] I love it.

Steven Washington: [00:27:09] Yeah. And so those are some of the in-the-moment practices that I teach. And I'll finish with one other thing. At the very end of the book, I offer a practice called Breath Prayers, where we combine the physical, the physiological act of breathing with intention, where you breathe in and out. and as you breathe in, you imagine cultivating something that you feel like you need in your life. And as you breathe out, you release that thing that may be standing in the way. Oftentimes, I'm looking for more peace. So as I inhale, I'll think about drawing in more peace. And as I exhale, I try to imagine releasing any fear or worry or anxiety. Doing that for five minutes can do so much for you. In addition to how it helps your body, it also helps to shift your mind and also creates a level of faith and optimism. And that's really important for all of us, but especially if you are dealing with addiction and entering into recovery.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:28:15] This is beautiful stuff, Steven, and I'm really enjoying it. I wish we had more time to chat, but time absolutely has flown by. And as you know, I wrap up every episode with a single question and that is Steven, what is your biggest helping that one most important piece of information you'd like somebody to walk away with after hearing our conversation today?

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Steven Washington: [00:28:39] I would love for people to know that they're not alone. That no matter what their challenges are, that there are people who understand them and care for them and love them just as they are in this moment. That feels very imperfect and very challenging so that they're not alone.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:29:03] Wonderfully said. Tell us where people can find out more about you online and get their hands on your book.

Steven Washington: [00:29:09] Yes. So, StevenWashingtonexperience.com is my website where you can find links to buy the book online, as well as links to buy the audio book which comes with a PDF. There's also other online courses that I offer on my site, as well as other writings that I've written over the years. And also my membership community called the SWE Studio where I teach a Pilates and Qi Gong fusion class to my community members every month, and I provide other wellness content. And I like to think of SWE Studio as kind of continuing education to what I offer in the book, because, again, self-care is a full-time job. And one of the things that we all are charged with doing is taking better care with us, taking better care of ourselves as we grow and change. So, that's where people can find me. As well as all the links to my social media, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:30:13] Beautiful, TikTok.

Steven Washington: [00:30:15] All that stuff.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:30:16] TikTok. We will have links to everything Steven Washington, and the show notes at the DailyHelping.com. Steven, thank you so much for joining us today. I love the conversation and keep doing what you're doing. The world needs it.

Steven Washington: [00:30:30] Thank you, Dr. Richard.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:30:32] And to each and every one of you who took time out of your busy day to listen to our conversation, thank you as well. If you like what you heard, go give us a follow on Apple Podcasts and leave us a five star review, because that is what helps other people find the show. But most importantly, go out there today

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and do something nice for somebody else, even if you don't know who they are and post it in your social media feeds using the hashtag #MyDailyHelping because the happiest people are those that help others.