



Jack Stewart Finding peace with Tai Chi

By Donna M. Garfield

Stress. Anxiety. Panic. Never enough time. More to do. That is how most of us feel every day. I met Jack Stewart in 2006 when I took Tai Chi classes and he was the teacher. Jack exudes a calmness that I find in very few people. What is his secret? How does one conquer the busyness that is a constant in our everyday lives?

I traveled to Barnet to meet with Jack Stewart and his wife LJ, who own and operate the Barnet Tradepost Wellness Center, which opened in 2006. The barn on the property was renovated in 2008 to include a large room on the second floor as a place for Jack to hold classes in Tai Chi, Kyudo (Zen Archery), and Kenjitsu (sword-play). It is a peaceful and quiet room where you take off your shoes upon entering and leave your anxieties at the door.

First, though, I am met by a tiger at the foot of the stairs. No, it is not real, but cats always intrigue me. LJ later tells me that Jack created the tiger in 1992. It hung at the Zen Archery Target Shed at Karmê Chöling in Barnet for 19 years and “was meant to ferociously capture and fight off all the bad karma that people were dumping when they practiced Zen Archery.” It was recently taken down and Jack decided to redo

it and keep it as a protector and guardian for the property at the Wellness Center.

Jack was born in Hyannis, Mass. He joined the Navy after high school and then worked at a hospital in the inhalation therapy department. He also attended the Swain School of Design where he earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Fine Arts. In 1984 he moved to Vermont and earned his Master’s Degree in Art and his teaching degree at Goddard College. He accepted a position as an art teacher at the Danville School and lived in North Danville. It is interesting to note that his great grandfather four times removed helped build the Old North Church.

LJ was born in New York City. She and Jack met at Karmê Chöling through their practice of Zen Archery. LJ says, “Neither of us are practicing Buddhism, which Karmê Chöling offers, but they often

have programs open to the general public. There were Zen Archery programs, and Jack and I were very often at the same ones.” LJ was working in New York City at the time and has practiced medical massage therapy since 1979. They have been married 10 years.

In 1985 Jack joined NVRH as a respiratory therapist. With health care changes in recent years, Jack felt he could do more to help people by being in a different venue, so he left NVRH to more fully practice the contemplative arts.

What are contemplative arts? Jack says, “It means mindfulness and things that are going to strengthen the inner person.” LJ adds, “Simultaneous with working at NVRH, Jack was teaching Tai Chi and Zen Archery classes at home in Danville, which are moving meditations that strengthen body, mind, and spirit. He also hand-sculpts wood. When you

do sitting meditation, it helps to quiet you, clear your mind, and open you up, but sometimes it’s difficult to take that with you. So the moving meditations actually help more in allowing you to take some of the things we practice and put them into our daily lives.”

“With Tai Chi, it’s coordinating breath and movement together with balance, which ties in well with respiratory,” says Jack. “When you start teaching, you discover you will learn more about the form itself.” He has been teaching Tai Chi for 35 years. Jack does Tai Chi every day. It takes about 20-30 minutes to go through the entire moving meditation.

In the United States we think of exercise as going to the gym or as another activity we need to fit into our already hectic lives.

“Tai Chi is practiced in all the Asian cultures under various names as a means for healthy living and longevity,” says LJ. “It is a way to incorporate our breathing with movement so that the life force

within each of us can freely pump and move. It is very much in line with all of Jack’s respiratory work that he has done over the years for himself and for his students.”

Jack also teaches deep breathing techniques. “A lot of people are afraid,” he explains. “Many times people hold their breath. Their shoulders come up. It shows your tension. When you do that, you make yourself very heavy on the top. Then you are prone to fall down. If you are elderly and fall down, there is a good possibility you will break a hip. When you are doing Tai Chi, it is like being a tree. Most people think of a tree as everything you can see on the top. The tree is more than that. It is the rooting down into the earth that makes it very stable so it is very heavy below the earth and then it is supple and moves with the wind. That is the way you want to have your body from your hips down. You want to be nice and rooted. You want to be light at the top. I encourage people just to sigh. Take a deep breath, hold it for a second, feel the tension, and then release the tension from the shoulders down. Feel that relaxation and do it frequently so that each time you do it, it clears your mind and relaxes your body. It is a peace you give yourself that moment and sometimes that moment is enough to find a clearer perspective on your situation.”

Tai Chi is a form of Kung Fu developed many centu-

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ries ago. According to Jack, it incorporates "very slow, flowing movements that in most forms are coordinated with breathing movements." How do martial arts integrate with this slow fluid movement? "Most people think of martial arts as a fighting skill and as something that is aggressive. It was never truly meant for that. It was meant for the fight internally to try to bring oneself into harmony and balance and to bring about peace of mind. It is for self-discipline. As anyone knows, your true enemy is within you and the more at peace you can be with yourself, the more you can handle those things that are outside of you."

In 2006, LJ experienced a serious health crisis. The neurosurgeons at the Mayo Clinic felt that her remarkable recovery was due to her lifestyle and her practices of Tai Chi and Zen Archery. Many rehabilitation centers and hospitals now offer Tai Chi as part of their wellness programs. It has shown to be beneficial for arthritis, osteoporosis, and fibromyalgia.

In 1971, while Jack was in

the military, he lost his center vision.

"I look at the tip of my finger and I don't see it. I have very good peripheral vision so in sword fighting I don't look at the sword. I look at everything so I see all the movement around me. If you move at all, I've got you. Most people don't think that I have any visual problems. I can see. I just have two blind spots where I can't see." Jack is considered legally blind so he cannot drive. Many times if you watch someone with vision problems, they move tentatively and may bump into things. LJ says, "Jack moves in a very stable, fluid, safe manner. Jack's practices of Tai Chi have enabled him to be much more fluid and sensitive to himself and his environment without the feeling that he is lacking in vision. It's brought forward a kind of sixth sense and awareness of his environment and himself that many of us don't have."

Jack does a lot of sculpting with large pieces of wood. His sculptures are located throughout the Wellness Center. He uses thick glasses and differ-

ent visual aids to get the best results from the vision he does have. LJ says, "I think that it is inherent in Jack's philosophy to take what you have and make the best of it as opposed to focusing on what you don't have. Literally, he turns that around to be a benefit in his life instead of a detriment."

Jack's definition of "Zen" is "the study of life. You can't get out of 'now'. It is here. No matter where you go, you take that with you." LJ adds, "We both try to live in the 'what is' and not the 'what if'. If you are living in the past or living in the future, your mind is not here right now. There is a certain amount of pain and suffering in this life but if we can learn from it, accept it, and move forward, we can keep going."

He also does Zen Gardening, using plants native to the area such as lilies, wildflowers, and perennials, as well as stones and large rocks. The garden perpetuates itself and is very low maintenance. He laughs and says, "I basically got tired of mowing the lawn in North Danville." He has started working on a garden in Barnet. It will

be a place to sit and reflect that brings peace and tranquility.

"Most of us have a cluttered life," adds LJ. "Another part of the practice is not to be austere but to notice that the negative is just as important as the positive as far as balance is concerned. Yin and Yang are the symbols of Tai Chi. They are the positive and negative which make a whole. The opposites create one entirety but in each is a little of the other."

What stresses Jack out?

Repeated negativity. His outlook is to try and be positive. "If I can't change it, sometimes the problem is that things don't want to be changed, or I cannot see a way of changing them, so I withdraw and allow it to envelop itself. Life will fix it. Sooner or later it will change and you try to be at peace with that. Sometimes it's tough love."

LJ finds that false insistence is her stress point. "When situations arrive in life where there is a hard line drawn or no flexibility, I get stressed out or walk away from it, too. We need to agree to disagree. Since I had my health crisis, life is precious,

and I don't want to waste a second of it with false illusions. Stagnation breeds disease. Even if it's baby steps, I need to see that there is at least movement."

Both Jack and LJ have learned the importance of having a good sense of humor and being able to laugh at themselves or a situation.

Jack's hobbies are sculpting and teaching fine arts. He substitutes at the Barnet School and received a community volunteer award from Barnet School last year. He has also been an artist in residence at many places including the Good Shepherd School and Catamount Arts. Every Thursday night he and LJ teach Zen Archery at the Field House at St. Johnsbury Academy.

As well as the classes Jack teaches, LJ practices licensed medical massage therapy, touch for health kinesiology, and laughter yoga. The Wellness Center also offers acupuncture, yoga, midwifery, and physical therapy.

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