

## Sensei John Evans: Cultivating Peace

By Sarah Dengler

Small bodies in scarlet karate gis run in wide circles and hurtle through the air. Sensei John Evans, in his own gi - black pants, white top, black belt - steps to the front of the room and calls the class to attention. Immediately kids ranging in age from seven to ten line up in neat rows. Sensei asks if they are ready to begin, and the class rings with enthusiastic cries of “Yes, sir.” For the next forty-five minutes, students learn to use their voices and their bodies to protect themselves. They practice running away from a bully or a stranger, and yelling for help as loud as they can. They also learn to kick, strike, and block an opponent. Class ends with a rowdy game of karate dodge ball. Welcome to Evans Kempo Karate in downtown Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

Sensei Evans stands 5’10” with a deceptively average build, a crew cut, and a ready smile that begins with his eyes, and radiates enthusiasm and kindness. Except for the belt he wears with his gi, you might not realize that he has a 5<sup>th</sup> degree black belt in Shaolin karate. But Evans does not teach traditional Shaolin karate; instead he sows seeds of peace as he teaches his students, from Tiny Tigers to adults, the art of compassionate self defense.

Growing up in Greenville, NH, John Evans was a small kid who got picked on, so for his twelfth birthday, he begged his parents for karate lessons and began his study of Shaolin Kempo karate. Evans’ first teacher “focused on more violent techniques, so if someone was bullying you at school you just punched them in the nose or put them in some sort of wrist lock – you would hurt them, and then they would leave you alone. There were a few moments in high school where that got me into trouble. I never started the fights, but the mentality back in the ‘80s was

'you may not start it but you're going to finish it.'" Despite a few fist fights, by the time John Evans graduated he carried himself with confidence that precluded anyone picking a fight with him. When he joined the Marines right after high school, he gained further training in the self defense techniques of war, techniques that meshed with the karate Evans had studied while in school. But today Evans says, "I no longer believe that that's the way to do it."

After four years in the Marines, and several jobs, Evans settled in NH, working as a software engineer, and raising his four children with his wife Jessie, all the while continuing to study karate. In the late '90s and early 2000 the elements of Kosho Shorei Ryu Kempo, fatherhood, and Buddhism came together in John Evans' life. "About a year before my son was born I was introduced to Kosho Shorei Ryu Kempo, and that's what I teach now." Kosho, based on the teachings of Buddhism, emphasizes spiritual development first and self defense second. Evans' switch to Kosho was motivated in part by his desire to teach his son martial arts without passing on a legacy of violence. "I started to practice Kosho and it was amazing. All the techniques that I was taught in the beginning were evasive, getting out of the way, not trying to overpower the opponent. It was completely different from what I was used to, but I was fascinated because it seemed so much more technical. It was like a puzzle." A few years later, a co-worker introduced him to Buddhism. "I just kept thinking about practicing a new way of martial arts, looking into Buddhism, having a child, then another child. It all fit together, and I opened my school."

Evans opened his dojo in 2000, teaching Kosho Shorei Ryu Kempo first in his backyard and later from several locations in Jaffrey and Peterborough. Then "two years ago I decided that the purpose of my life was to teach, and I should stop pretending that it wasn't and just do

this full time.” It was a leap of faith for both John and his wife. “We have four kids, so it was a huge decision to go from a well paying job into a financial mystery. Although my bank account hasn’t grown, my spiritual bank account has grown tremendously. I feel better. I’m healthier. Before I ran the school full time I was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease. Ever since I left and really aligned myself with my path, I’ve been symptom free. When I struggled against what I was meant to do in life, it was destroying me physically. Once I aligned myself, I felt great. I’m happy. I smile all the time.”

Evans describes an important underlying principle of his school: “I believe, taking a more Buddhist approach, that when you react with violence toward someone, you create a seed of violence in that person and that seed will grow. So what I try to do now is teach a more peace based or compassionate martial art.”

This principle is evident in his class for high school students, where five young men work on disarming techniques, coming at each other with long black batons and wrestling with intensity. Evans says that many teens come in with the desire to learn martial arts like the Ultimate Fighting Championship they see on TV, and he shows them a few of those techniques right away. For this class, Evans demonstrates disarming an opponent, taking away the baton, and bringing his attacker to the floor with little effort. But after he gets the baton, he tosses it away in one direction and runs in the other. At the end of class, John explains to his students that it is better to run than to stay and beat your opponent, leaving him angry and wanting revenge. “It’s our job as practitioners of this martial art to remember that we don’t want to plant the seed of violence, and we have to work on staying on the peaceful side of everything. That’s the ultimate goal.”

Sensei Evans reflects on the challenges and goals of teaching Kosho: “So many people think that martial arts are about beating people up, and that’s frustrating. That’s why I [teach], because if one person leaves here and is able to create a more peaceful situation for himself or for someone else, then it’s worth it. I want to plant positive seeds and have students go out and cultivate them.”