



Episode 359 – The McDojo Paradox | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey, what's up everybody? Welcome! This is whistlekick Martial Arts Radio episode 359. Today, we are talking about The Paradox of McDojos. My name is Jeremy Lesniak. I'm your host for the show. I'm the founder of Whistle Kick, and I love the martial arts, and that's why I do this show twice a week. That's why Whistle Kick is a thing. That's why we do all the other projects that we do here at Whistle Kick. If you want to check out what we do, the best place to start is whistlekick.com. You can see everything that we do from there. Or if you just want to skip right to show notes and transcripts for this podcast, you can find those at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. And while we do offer many of our products on Amazon, if you head on over to whistlekick.com, you can save 15% using the code `podcast15`. So what's a mcdojo? Well back on episode 119, with sensei Robert Ingram, we've talked about mcdojos. And of course, you may not know him by that name, but you may know him from his social media brand McDojo Life. And, sensei Ingram and I have had the opportunity to talk on a number of occasions most of which were not part of an episode. But ever since we put that show to bed, I've had this idea rattling around at the back of my head, that there is something deeper to the idea of a mcdojo. Something that we really need to be aware of that we don't really talk about. That's why this episode is titled The Paradox of McDojos. First, I do want to apologize, ok? Um, I'm a little bit under the weather. You might hear it in my voice. I'm gonna do my best to not cough and of course if I do cough we are probably gonna chop all that out. But it is affecting my thought process a little bit and is affecting my voice. Got some phlegm going on. Um, but I was ready to talk about this and I've found over the years that when



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I'm ready to tackle a subject, it's best not to wait. So I'm not waiting. We're talking about it now. Here we go.

So what's a mcdojo? A mcdojo is a general disparaging term for a poor martial arts school. And I think we can all agree on that as a broad sort of 800-foot definition. But when we get deeper, when we get down to the greedy, what actually makes a school a mcdojo? We no longer agree. In fact, it's terribly subjective. And I would say that not only is that a good thing, but it's a necessary thing. Now unfortunately, we in the martial arts have this culture of mutual skepticism. We are always critical, I don't mean you as an individual, I don't mean your school as in particular school, but just in general: martial arts is critical of itself, of martial arts. Of whether or not things are effective or whether or not they work. Now to a certain degree, this is a good thing. Because this is what keeps us accountable in a world, in the martial arts world, because we don't have official 03:35 standards. There's no single governing body. Now there maybe some of you out there who would want that, I don't want that. When it comes to martial arts specially I'm very libertarian minded. I believe that the best will rise up and the worst will fall off. And I think that that overall is true. Of course when we talk about best versus worst, that is again very subjective because I could be looking for something in a particular martial arts school and find it there in an incredibly effective way. You might be looking for something different, and that's fine. That very same school, completely ineffective. And that is the key because when we talk about martial arts in whether a school or a style, or a martial artist, are good or bad. Whether or not they pass the test, the standard for a mcdojo, we have to understand that it is incredibly subjective. Let's say that I want to lose weight or get in shape, however you want to term that. And I've heard martial arts can be a good way to do that. And I go to a martial arts school, that teaches very very traditional let's say Isshinryu karate. Isshinryu is one of the styles that I grew up with so I know what fairly well, and I know some of the principles. Well Isshinryu, the way it is traditionally taught, has shorter stances than other martial arts styles, ok? Well that may mean that I come out of a long class training Isshinryu karate and my legs aren't sore, and I don't feel that I'm getting the benefits that I'm looking for from that school. I could call that a mcdojo because it doesn't meet my standard. But someone else, someone who maybe has hipper knee issues may train at that very same school and because those stances are shorter, they don't experience the pain that they did maybe when they were training in another style. I won't name off another style, but will say another school, another style that has deeper stances. Now that person's gonna love that school. But I go off an I train somewhere else that let's say even switching schools I go to the longer deeper stance school and I come out and say this is great, this is exactly what I wanted. So here we have two people, with two different goals and both of them find one of the schools to be great, and the other to not be what they wanted. Does that make either of them a mcdojo?

Now what tends to happen when we throw around this term mcdojo is that people will define anything that is not what they feel to be up to standard as a mcdojo. And that's not ok. It's not fair - one of my least favorite statements, but in this case it's incredibly true because I would go out on 07:02 to say, every single school out there, would fall under the category of mcdojo to someone else. Now originally, I believe that when the term mcdojo was being thrown around, I



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first heard it probably in the 90's. It was generally referring to a school that had reduced the standards required for passing rank and often charged more money for certain things. See I grew up in an era where paying money for testing wasn't the norm as it is today where commitments, you know signing on for a certain contract, you know I'm gonna train at this school for 6 months or 12 months or whatever. That wasn't around. Where we have very few options in terms of equipment people didn't tend to wear flamboyant uniform colors or any of that. It was a much more traditional world. But, there were far fewer martial arts schools. And when we look at today, you can find schools that do things in probably any way you could imagine. There are schools who will take 10 or 12, 15 years for a typical person to earn a black belt. And most of us would say "well that's silly, that's too long". And then there are schools that would promote people to black belt in 1 to 2 years. And most of us will say "that's too short" because most of us were in the middle. So we tend to define what is appropriate by our own experiences. The people who are training in that school that award to black belt after 1 to 2 years will say that 5 to 10 years is far too long, which is the average, and 15 years is unthinkable. And then the folks who are awarding black belts in 15 years will look at everyone else and say "their standards are too low".

Now who is right? No one is right because no one has the right to define what is and what is not good or appropriate in the martial arts. And here's why: the moment you say this good martial arts and this is not, if anyone disagrees with you, we have a conflict. Now who has the right to be the ordained person to say that they are correct when they define what is and what is not martial arts? Now there are certainly outlier sort of things where most of us will agree. And I see videos like these all the time on social media. But they ignore very simple point. It is very unlikely that anyone is going to train in martial arts and not derive benefit from it. Let's take the example to school that promotes to black belt in 1 to 2 years. Is there black belt equivalent to the black belt from another school? Probably not. Is your black belt that you earned in 6 years equivalent to the black belt earned in say 15 years? Probably not. Is that ok? Absolutely. Because the only reason that we really need to care is because of one a bit of marketing and two, ego. If someone sees you earned a black belt in 1 to 2 years, in some kind of you know newspaper ad or marketing piece and that's where they choose to go, that's fine. Because chances are they weren't going to do well with the school that typically awarded a black belt in 5, 10, 15 years. So I look at that and I say I would rather have that person training and earning rank and deriving some benefit from the school rather than not training at all. See for me it comes down to one very simple thing, one very rudimentary idea: that everyone who trains in martial arts benefits from it. It may be a small benefit. It may be a short-term benefit, but there is benefit. And if someone comes in and they start at what you might consider a substandard aimed mcdojo school, there's an opportunity for them to get better and too see that there are other ways, and they may wanna go explore those. But if some of the people there had their way in all of those schools that they defined that even I would define as substandard were shut down, how many people would not have the opportunity to train? How many of those people would not derive the benefit that they do from their training? How many of those people that end up training at other schools later would not have done so because they didn't have the opportunity early on? Whether it's because of proximity, or caused, or just ignorance? Because let's face it, most people that do not train in martial arts do not understand



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that a black belt is not a standardized thing because we as martial artist have spent decades talking about that isn't the standard. How many schools out there are black belt schools? How many schools out there have black belt clubs? That's exactly what the language does. It creates that perspective of standardization.

Now, sure it's a standard in your school and your school only or maybe in your system, but the rest of the world doesn't know that. However, if you were to ask people "hey, does this academic program that takes 1 to 2 years to complete, are you expecting to learn the same amount as this 10-year program over here?". Most people would say no. But since we can't say that your definition and my definition are better than one another, there's only one thing we can do and that's to focus on our own training. Or if you are a school owner, to focus on delivering the best curriculum. The best training. To be the best school that you can be. Because in every industry, the cream rises to the top. The best become known. See in martial arts when it comes to business, we tend to be pretty backwards in a lot of things. And here's an example I've used in many many cases probably even on the show: the number 1 fast food retailer in the world is McDonald's unless Subway passed them, which may have happened. But where do we see every McDonald's next to a Burger King? or rather vice versa we see Burger King next to McDonald's? Because it creates an awareness that ultimately financially benefits both restaurants. If you're Burger King and you felt threatened by McDonald's, you would not open a restaurant right next door. You would open as far away as possible. But that's not what we do in martial arts. We look around and we cast doubt, and we disparage other schools, and what does that do? It creates misunderstanding. And it causes people to not want to choose one over the other so they choose nothing. When we look at the statistics on martial arts participation in the U.S. because these are the ones I have the numbers for this is where we're based, our participation is roughly half of what we see across the world. If we could get out of our own way, if we could stop calling everything to mcdojo, if we could stop saying "you're doing that form wrong", if we could stop saying "that would never work on the street", it would get better. And more people will have the opportunity to train and and feel good about that training.

So the next time you feel like putting a ton of energy into tearing down someone else, another school, posting what is essentially hatred of someone participating in the thing that you love so much, realize that it doesn't anyone or anything. And it makes the people who are aware of you and what you do less likely to train. Are there mcdojos out there? Sure. But the definition is so subjective that I guarantee I and every other person on the planet, we were to go and make list of the schools that were mcdojos, there will be some overlap, and there will be some disagreement. And if everyone made a list like that, I will guarantee that the school that you train at will be on someone's list. So think about that.

I wanna thank you for your time today, and I wanna know what you think. Do you have a different view? I'd love to hear it. And there's a few different ways. The best way is at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. This is episode 359 and leave a comment on the post page. If you don't want to share publicly, you can e-mail me at jeremy@whistlekick.com, and of course you can follow us on social media, we are @whistlekick on Facebook, twitter, YouTube,



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and Instagram. I wanna thank you for your time today. Don't forget code `podcast15` gets you 15% off, whistlekick.com with everything, all the stuff.

Until next time. Train hard, smile, and have a great day.