



Episode 392 – Grandmaster Quynh Ngo | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



#### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

Hello everyone! Welcome, this is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 392 with my guest, grand master Quynh Ngo. My name is Jeremy Lesniak, I'm your host. I'm the founder of whistlekick and martial arts is kind of my jam. I love it and that's why we have whistlekick and you can check out everything that we work on at [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). While you're there use the code `PODCAST15`, that will get you 15% in any of our shirts, t-shirts, sweatshirts, sweatpants, uniforms, hats, sneakers, sparring gear. What else we got? It's a lot. There's a lot going on over there so just check it out and don't forget, it's more than just products. We have a lot of other things that we work on here on whistlekick and [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com) is kind of the hub that tie in everything that we're working on. Of course, this show has its own website, [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) because we like to keep the names easy and that's where you can find everything relating to this and the other 391 episodes. We bring you 2-week all for free and hopefully, you'll share them around and comment and just show us some love because after all, the martial arts is better when we're all participating. We've had quite a few people on the show over the years who have started their own style or inherited a family style and today's guest is one of those folks. Grand Master Ngo inherited the style that his father founded in the 60's that bear some almost eerie similarities and philosophy to another style that you've heard of and we're going to talk about that and we're going to talk about a lot more. The stories that this man has are amazing, compelling and I'm sure you're going to enjoy this one so sit back, check it out. Grand Master Ngo, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

#### **Quynh Ngo:**



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Yes, sir, good morning or afternoon here in Florida.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, it's afternoon for both of us, yeah. Well, you're in Florida so it's probably sunny there. A good bet that it's sunny but miraculously, it's actually sunny here in Vermont at the moment which usually only happens in the mornings.

**Quynh Ngo:**

Yes, Vermont very nice state. I went there in college and the snowscape was the first time when I was 19 and didn't have the right equipment, obviously, wear jeans and sweatshirts and you know how that goes when you wear jeans and sweatshirt against wet.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I do. It's not a fun day when you start out that way.

**Quynh Ngo:**

Very nice state and very good to visit and two years ago, my wife and I went and visit Vermont and we went up there and all this time escape the heat for three weeks but lo and behold, when we got there, it was the heatwave came through there. It was actually hot.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

There have been plenty of times in August where Vermont, the northeast, is hotter than the South.

**Quynh Ngo:**

You know why? Because you guys don't have air-conditioning in the house so the Airbnb we rented has no air-conditioning. At least in Florida, you can turn it on.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I have one but it usually stays in the garage. About half the time I have to take it out for about 1 week a year. There's a joke that a friend of mine told me when I first moved to Vermont and he said when people ask me about my summer plans, what do you do in Vermont during the summer? And I said, well, we usually take the week off from work in the summer.

**Quynh Ngo:**

Oh, and do what?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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Because it's such a short summer, take the week off. The week of summer in Vermont because it's usually pretty short but of course, we're not here to talk about weather. We're not here to talk about the differences between Vermont and Florida, although, it's a pretty long list. We're here to talk about martial arts. We're here to talk about specifically you and your story so let's start in probably the most fundamental way we could, how did you find the martial arts?

**Quynh Ngo:**

My father started the martial art called Cuong Nhu mean hard and soft in Vietnam in 1965 and ironically, I was born in '65 so I was always called as Cuong Nhu as my twin and he came to United States in 1971 to get his PhD in entomology, university of Florida and started his first dojo there and when he left, that dojo grew two, three, four different dojos and when we came back, it developed and now we have 50 schools all over the country, 2 in Venezuela, 2 in Germany, 1 in France and about a handful in Vietnam but it's about 50 in the United States then so, I kind of grew up going to the dojo in the beginning to play around and kind of look around and you get into the atmosphere that you see all the adults or kids trying so you decided you don't want to fall behind as you work and my dad made it fun for us to do karate so it's not really a chore to go, it's more of a thing to do for fun and then eventually, it grow on you to it becomes routine and then it became your habit and then that's what you do and I'll probably say, growing up in martial art world, the part that entice me the most is probably the people. It's the punch, the kick, the stances, the throwing, the armbars, the weapon, all that is repetitive somewhat, different levels that you learn and once you achieve it, you feel like you did this kata down, this spinning kick down and you need to work more on your rolls but the classmates and the people that you train with are interchangeable so you learn different personality and the enjoyment of training with people is what kept me going all these years and it holds true till today. Yeah, just a quick background, so my dad left, came back to Vietnam in 1974 and the country fell under the communist regime in '75 so we got to stay behind and it took us two years to plan an escape and that's how our model was freedom or death. We decided we had to leave. We escaped out in a little fishing boat, float out in the pacific ocean in the month of May for about 5 nights and 4 days and we got picked up by a merchant ship from Indonesia that was coming back from Japan and come to the coast and pick us up and we went to the refugee camp and stayed there for about 6 months and then got sponsor and came back to America.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Wow. We have to talk about that. Keep going, keep going!

**Quynh Ngo:**

Yeah, the ironic is my dad start the martial art when he came to Florida, now my 3 children is actually teaching same style Cuong Nhu at that club in college now but the escape from Vietnam was 20 of us, 3 different families, 20 of us in a little fishing boat and we float down the ocean just for enough about 10 days' worth of food and drink and if nobody picked us up and just what happened to many millions of people didn't happen to us so I rode a little short mile that in baseball they say you have three strikes



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then you're out. I actually have 3 strikes and I'm still here so I owed a lot to my calling that's why I live it, I'm a perpetual optimist and positive person because in 1968, there's a big war in Central Vietnam, it's called the [00:08:55] Offensive. The communist bombing and took over the city for two weeks and we had to hide under the tunnel of our house and my mom actually delivered my sister, my baby sister in that span of two weeks with the Communists taking over with three little boys. My oldest brother was only 3, I was 2, my brother's 1 when my sister's been born and so that first miraculously, none of the bombs didn't hit us and we didn't get discovered or captured so I should've been dead there. In 1972, I contract malaria, went to the hospital for 9 days and for malnourished child in the third world country somehow I made it and bedridden for a few weeks after and came through with no modern medicine and then of course, the '77 escape from the boat. I've already looked at it and I've been blessed three times so I love America, this is my country, I'm very loyal and very humbled to be here. I own a business here, my children born and raised here. I'm American at heart because it gave me hope, a future, an outlook that I've been to the other side so I'm just very thankful man.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Wow. Alright. There's a lot there that we're going to go back and talk about and the first thing I want to talk about is of course, the style part. You mentioned that your father had started a style in the 60's and I know because of the show, I know a little bit about some of the martial arts from each country and I've done a little bit of research on the martial arts in Vietnam but you're referring to the name is...Cuong Nhu.

**Quynh Ngo:**

Yes, Cuong Nhu means hard and soft, yes, sir.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Cuong Nhu. But you've also referred to the school as a dojo and you mentioned karate so for the folks, including me, who have never trained in Cuong Nhu, what were the foundational elements? Where did your father pull the pieces from that became that style?

**Quynh Ngo:**

Okay, my dad, initially, the Cuong Nhu, he trained in a lot of Shotokan in the beginning so you see Cuong Nhu, the first part of white belt to green, you're doing a lot of hard style. Block, punch, kick, stance, more of a Shotokan base which is actually beneficial because when you first train, you kind of want to train for strength, speed, style, just to understand your body and get some fundamental technique down. So, the hard style approach was very beneficial and my dad also trained, worked with Vovinam and Judo and his brother was an Aikido instructor so the basic of Cuong Nhu is a blend of pieces of Vovinam in more of a soft style. Vovinam is more of a soft style. It is probably a blend of some form of hard versus wing chun movement because it's formed in Southeast Asia so it's more for the people with





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smaller stature so that's more of a cross between hard and soft in some capacity and then the aikido, the foot movement that my dad loves and he adapt that, the principle, and then the Judo part is when you close combat, it's all about leverage, angle and getting your opponents off balance and when you are tied up. So, he insert piece of the principle of these styles and made a harder curriculum to go develop from hard to soft and the blend in between with kata, techniques, self-defense and weapons as well and he always pride in this, well, it's kind of like building a race car. You don't necessarily have the best of everything but you take the most efficient. Air-conditioning from a Ford, your chassis from a Chevrolet, the horse power of a BMW, a braking system of a Dodge, a rear-wheel drive out of a Corvette. Basically, the car is like a potluck. You take advantage of what's available and my dad, as we gotten older, we realized that today, they would have diagnosed a man like him with what you will call ADHD. You know what that is. So, he get bored quick so as he assemble things, he doesn't want to do the exact same thing over and over. So, he blend and we actually have a full curriculum that almost academic-like so our dojo in San Diego, in Oakland, in Seattle, Washington, Miami, Orlando, we all do the identical for every rank for every techniques. It should be like if you walk into a Subway franchise and you order a BLT, they taste and look exactly identical so we have the documents, in video and manuals all these years so everybody doing the same thing so that way there is no discrepancy of interpretation of the final product, so to speak.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Now, we've had quite a few people on the show who have trained in, let's call them, newer styles. Styles that are not your standard fair Goju or your standard fair Kyokushin or ITF Taekwondo. Some folks who have trained in something that was founded more recently than that and some of those people, it's even a family tradition but I don't know that we've talked to anyone who checks both of those boxes that have 50 different schools using the same curriculum. So, what is it about Cuong Nhu in the way that your father presented it and that you've presented and I assume expanded the reach with the different schools that it's grown so much?

**Quynh Ngo:**

It's all because our philosophy on training is not about the competition to others or other style because one of our code of ethics is students to respect all other branch of martial arts and only use Karate to protect truth and reason. So, we focus more on internal improvement and I can describe it to you kind of like three stages of ego. You have external rock ego, like a rock rolling down the mountain and it crush other rocks and when it crush other rocks, it collect residue and it get bigger and bigger but that big rock eventually will crush itself if it hits another bigger rock or it fall down to the end and it fall in the river and it just lay in the bottom so the external ego by comparing yourself to others may work in a short term but in the lifetime, you're going to stop somewhere. With the internal ego, the liquid stage of ego, you learn to navigate around things. Over, under or through or to the side as long as you flow and progress and move forward, that internal growth will last longer but our Cuong Nhu philosophy really is the gas state ego where you can actually encapsulate liquid in a glass of water but it still can evaporate



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and move within so you, if you have to be content with your own growth and your own movement to develop and stay with the style because you may learn eight things but you may really be good at only four things but at least you have eight options to find out who you are but a certain style, because they're so rigid a certain way that it's really body-specific made that way, so you can practice a certain style and do okay at it but to be really good at it, it's hard. It's tough. It will be like if you're 6 foot tall and weighs a hundred and fifty pounds, you're not going to be excellent at Judo against a 5 foot 8, 150-pound person because they get more leverage, you know what I mean? Cuong Nhu has a diversity of things that when people learn all the fundamental basics of katas and weapons, they actually as they get high in rank, they specialize a little bit more in a certain that fit their lifestyle, age, body specifics, or just the way they see things so, we adapt these principles, not for the sake of copying but for the sake of appreciate the originality with martial arts will create. So, our [00:19:21] in Cuong Nhu maybe be, it may say, [00:19:27] in Judo called o goshi but actually how we execute our throw is a little bit different because with more hard style, soft style in throwing than a true practitioner in Judoka. You know what I mean? And so, people like that. They like where they can adjust the movement and the technique to the body so it's more of an art thing versus a science. I think some of the traditionalists in certain art, they have so much respect and love for the founders. They remember what it's like to learn from the founder so they teach the exact form. Basically, it's almost like you do KFC chicken, you're not going to alter that ingredient and that formula in KFC because that's what you know and you want to keep the originality where in Cuong Nhu, my dad teach you the principle and we continue doing but each individual can alter to make it work according to their body type and the physicality of the technique as long as the base principle is understood and so, today's generation, you can text with one finger or two fingers or three fingers as long as it works. People more likely not want to be someone control their thought process so it work for us and I think because in the Western World, people like to have a little bit flexibility and adaptability to their own thinking instead of have to wrack their brain trying to remember all the exact details of every move and, in a way, it's just a generation thing and I grew up very traditional and I learned aikido and Judo and I love and appreciate the traditional aspect of it but trying to remember every little detail like a formula in mathematics or chemical reaction in chemistry class, that become a burden for today's generation so my dad's a really adaptable person. He thinks further ahead and he doesn't get his ego hurt if someone can reposition their weapons a little bit better angle to make this move better from what he's shown, he would love that. He actually likes it when you come up and tell me, hey, O Sensei, I discovered that if you move over this angle a little bit better and your [00:22:27] move over here, it's more efficient and as soon you say that he would tell you, that's great and want you to show to other blackbelt so that's my father. Well, I can't say that with other founders. I wouldn't say that. I just know my dad, yeah, my dad is just a...my dad loves it when you have an open mind and when you're very open for things so...

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

The way you were describing some of the philosophy, it's not uncommon for people to look at the martial arts in that way now to shed some of the constraints that could come with the traditional art but



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if we go back a few decades as your father was forming this, that was kind of an uncommon philosophy. In fact, there's only one other person from that era who was talking about things in that way and of course, that was Bruce Lee. Was your father at all a fan? Are you at all a fan of Bruce Lee and the Jeet Kune Do philosophy?

**Quynh Ngo:**

Yes, you know, we're not really up and up with that until later but it's kind of strange and [00:23:36] my dad think that way too. My dad doesn't believe in how you technically can restrain yourself to exactness if we are built different, we're all different culture, different body movement, different flexibility and different body specifics so he doesn't get it and I think through time, for these martial arts get into this competition that they put everyone according to the size and weight so you compete against each other according to weight class and size, so to speak, and I think part of that, it dampens the ability to grow because if two person, similar size, throwing each other, you lose the creativeness how you can throw somebody twenty pound more or 4 inches taller. That adaptation doesn't exist because everything you learn it works because you throw yourself so my dad, by coming to the Western world, to America, he changed a certain matter of teaching adaptation because if he was staying in Vietnam, we all have similar size within 10% of each other but you come to America, the size and the factors is so diverse that if you can't adapt the Western world it wouldn't be as popular because the goal of taking someone down has to be taught where my daughter can take me down instead of me taking her down because I'm 40 pounds more than she is and if I teach the same technique that works for me, it wouldn't be efficient for her and she will eventually get to a certain level, let's say brown belt, she would say, you know what? I'm having a hard time doing this, let me try go do something else. So, by adapting through time to make it work for everybody even though it follows the same principles, I think people like that and since my dad is really an open-minded, no ego type and now that I look back, Bruce Lee thinks of the same way. He doesn't believe in a certain technique work for everybody. They might have to adjust but the principle of Jeet Kune Do all stand in line [00:26:17] are always the same.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's interesting and it would be...we'd have to go in a parallel universe and put the two of them, your father and Bruce Lee in a room and I'm sure it would be fascinating to hear that conversation. I bet they would have agreed on quite a bit, from what you're saying. Would have been neat. When you talk about your trials, your three strikes, as you called them, in any one of those experiences would have a significant effect, a profound effect on someone but for you to go through all three of them, I'm sure, had an even bigger effect and I'm wondering when you look at those experiences now, how did they shape you and how did they shape the way you look at martial arts?

**Quynh Ngo:**

I look at martial art as a tool to make someone feel better or be better for themselves and that's why the word called martial art, you can't do one without the other. It really make me feel like I'm more



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efficient in time. I don't waste time because your time maybe up at any time and it make me more efficient as an instructor. It make me more efficient to motivate a student and tell them, whatever you do in life whether it's a job, it's academic, it's a relationship or hobby, don't waste time because that's one thing you can't buy back: time. Your health and time it's been parallel and if you have both, your perspective and life has to be great so a lot of people they look at material items to define existence. In reality, they should be content with health and time in their hand but what you do with just time is important and one of our philosophy, we always say vision without action is a dream soon forgotten. The word here is not vision. The word is action and so, our Eastern philosophy is more work the process. The journey works more than destination because there are no shortcuts because there is no end. As long as you're alive, you go evolve and moving target so you want to progress. Progression is actually perfection in our eye so in martial art, it's not the goal to get to green belt or brown belt or black belt or kick at the face level, your goal is to be better now than you were a month ago and that's the goal and wherever it takes you, you perfecting your own because you're making progress and again, we tie that back again, Jeremy, to what ego. The moment you compare externally then your ego will get touched and that's the part we actually talk about all the time wherever we teach and so, these items, they mean because it make me realize that I am small in this universe. It's like a grain of sand on the beach so my existence is not up to me but whether I excel or extinct. So, I decided if I had three warnings, then I don't want to extinct, I want to excel so it make me humbler, make me more focused, more dedicated as a martial artist but martial art is just a small facet of life. It's a tool, for us, to use to make someone see themselves better because you learn kata one and you achieve it and you learn kata two and you're constantly learning but somewhere you have to believe that you can achieve things and people are still [00:30:48] the mental and emotional approach in martial art for other things in life because ultimately, karate for everyone is still vocational. It's not something life and death like hundred years ago you had to protect your crops and your homes but today, it's more of a self-help role, appeal to your emotional and then the physical part comes with it because you learn to discover yourself so yes, it's improved me because I don't take time for granted. I feel like I have a calling in the sense that as long as I'm productive, at least something behind better than me then when my time's due here, part of me still remain and yes, so I do see the bigger picture.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

You mentioned earlier that your children are now teaching your family's art to others. What was it like for them growing up, learning from you and, I assume, I don't know if your father was involved in teaching them as well but that passing down to the family, you got to contribute that back to them as well. What was that like, for you, being able to pass on your father's art?

**Quynh Ngo:**

It's almost a duty. I got it pretty easy. I can't take credit here. I got most of the black belt, actually, all the black belt in our dojo teach them. I'm just a father. I helped tweak something, give them a little bit here and there but no, I'm not that superman you want who can teach your kids. It's hard. It's kind of like





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you're teaching your spouse a certain thing or she teach you a certain thing. It gets personal real quick so I'm lucky that they love the art because they know it's an important tradition in the family but where I'm lucky, the other black belts actually love teaching them and they love learning from all the black belts and I'm just kind of a supplement, last 5% detail but I stay involved as the father and just because I am who I am. They know it will make me happy to stay on and I have a little bit different approach. This part right here I use the Western approach because the Eastern philosophy, Western philosophy, they all have great, great things. My dad learned to adapt both including even religions. He will adapt certain principle of different culture of the earth and religion to make it fit and in the Eastern culture, you won't make your children do this. In the Western, you give them the flexibility where they think it's their choice so what I do, I tell them all the time that I appreciate them doing this to make me look good and make me proud so they feel like they're doing me a favor and as they get older, they realize that they're doing themselves a favor but initially when they're young, I want them to feel like they're doing it for me and make me happy and please me versus I'm making them go for me. So, the mental approach of not making them so it become a burden, make them want to go more and just the fact that everyone enjoy teaching and we don't have this domineering atmosphere in our dojo. The kids like it and our students like it. My dad is a very approachable man and so am I. So, we don't have this process to make the student bow down to us like we walk on water or something like that and it's easy to teach and students love to come because they're not intimidated and if they feel like they want to stop for a month, take a mental break, they don't feel guilty. They would tell us, I'm burned out, let me take a month off. Instead of some art they make the student feel guilty and make them almost like being a follower and because of that, you put the spell on the student that it put a lot of mental pressure on them to perform so it's hard to grow. It's almost like micromanagement in a business. You teach them, you lead them, you motivate them is different than you forcing them.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Can we talk about that? The idea of students taking a break for a minute because that's a hot button topic among school owners.

**Quynh Ngo:**

Students...it's like, you know, they go to school nine months. They take a little time off. They come back. Their lifestyle here in the Western world, they play a sport three, four months, they take time off, they play different sport. They take chemistry one semester, next semester they may take biology or economics or American history so to expect someone to go 4, 5 years in a row without that time break in between, it's not healthy and so the student, from time to time, they will take a week or two off and with today, you want to keep them inspired and you don't want to keep them inspired in the sense of making them feel like they have to take the test to be justified somebody and I think most martial art who approach if they feel like you don't get to black belt, you failed. You failed by not getting to the ultimate goal so the student feel a lot of pressure, they lose the day to day enjoyment and when they take time off, they feel like they move far away from that and our approach is not like that. we don't



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approach the end result as black belt because as you know, black belt is just the beginning. We approach that as okay, if you want, you take a month off this summer, you take a month off on December. I'm looking forward for you to come back in January and if you don't know this form for your next level, we're going to start that so we identify what they're going to do when they come back so they have something to look forward to so we keep the mental suspension on the present thing versus aiming for black belt so many months or years down the road. It almost like no one started in high school when they walk into high school freshman and the first thing they want to do is I can't wait to graduate. You have to say I can't wait to go to this class where this teacher is really nice. I can't wait to go to that class because the subject is fun or I can go here because everybody loves being around me and looking forward to me to come in so most dojos dangling the rank, that's the reason why the student go to class. We dangling the community as you don't come, your classmate missing the training part, missing your energy, the fun so the pressure is more of the dojo needs you more than you need the belt and that's the difference.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's fascinating and it sounds like the philosophy in the style of giving people some flexibility, some space to individualize isn't just in the curriculum but it's in the culture of the schools and I wonder, if you're willing to share, when you talk about students taking time off, how many of them come back?

**Quynh Ngo:**

95% because we tell them, okay, you take this month off, almost 6 weeks off and you're traveling to do stuff and your classmate will stay in contact say alright, hey, I don't want to lose my training partner and then when they like you as an instructor, they will come back. If they like a kata, they will eventually win out so when you ask the student what's your favorite subject in school, they usually name the teacher, right? They don't say, well, I like physics because force, mass, force and acceleration or whatever. They usually say oh, Mr. Nelson is a really nice guy. I like his class. He makes it fun, he explains real slow, he makes it enjoyable to come and my classmates are really helpful. That's the impression and that holds true for older people. We don't want to look for a micromanager. That's a bad way to manage a business and people who usually like the colleagues, they like the bosses, the environment they're in. Whatever type of work they do, they can overcome that as long as they love the people. So, we want the student come to our dojo and our style that they love. You are associate with the people that they're with first and if they like that, they're willing to go through and learn the katas, the weapons, the techniques, the throw, the laws and whatnot but if you teach them the technique, for them to master the techniques and the katas, will take weeks or months and they wait it out. Every day they come, they don't look forward to do something, that's because they're not good at it yet and they don't see the end but that, we don't focus. We focus on you come because you love hanging, spending time with your teammate, with your instructors, with your dojomate and then the learning part is actually secondary so we don't ever talk about the rank. We never dangle the green belt, the brown belt or you need to work hard next 18 months to get to this belt. We don't talk like that at all because if you're dangling 18



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months like you say, if you train hard takes 18 months, you get the brown belt, what happen when at 18 months come, what are you going to do and he's not ready, what are you going to do? You can't give him a brown belt. He knows he's not ready then what can you do? You can't make a promise like that but what you can promise him if you enjoy training and everything else will take care of itself.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'm blown away at the elegance of how simple you've presented that. I think and longtime listeners know, I had a school for a very short period of time, and one of the things that we've talked a lot on this show about over the last few years is how to balance rank and curriculum and keeping people motivated and all of this and what you're saying, what makes complete sense now that I'm hearing it from you, is that the martial arts is the framework but the important part, the part you focus on, is on the culture on making sure that people are happy and engaged. I'm going to guess that you love teaching. Is that fair to say? You love teaching martial arts.

**Quynh Ngo:**

Yes, sir. I feel like when I thank the student at the end of the hour in a national banquet at the end, I thank first and foremost, all the students. You guys don't realize that you live in my dream. If it wasn't for you, I would not be the man that I am. You helped shape me. You make me enjoy this. I appreciate you here to give me a chance to grow the arts within me, to grow my personality so they feel like they're part of the team and your approach is you're doing someone a favor teaching them something to get them to blackbelt, that approach work with half the people but when you make them feel they're more important then, all of a sudden, oh my goodness, if I quit, I'm messing him up so I'm helping him and on the way, I'm helping myself so I'm going because they feel somewhat of an obligation to help me grow as an instructor also and help their classmate, inspire their classmate in training so they feel like they have a bigger calling so they came to decide, you know, getting a brown belt is not important to me anymore but then they see themselves wait a minute, but if there's some other people's life affected if I just quit so they have to doubletake and think again and that's important and that's what we press.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And I hope the school owners out there who have been asking for more content around how to grow their school, I hope you will rewind the last 10, 15 minutes or whatever it was and listen to that again because I don't know that we could put anything out that would be better. Obviously, there is more than one way to grow a school and more than one way to approach a martial arts school as an owner but this is a perfect example of how focusing on the people, the culture, the humanity, the human element in a school leads to growth. 50 schools from a, I guess, we can call it a 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> generation martial art is pretty impressive and I don't think that's an accident.

**Quynh Ngo:**



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And you know, I can kind of be a limit to the side and people want to have a sense of belonging. It's been that way in ancient time and years ago, martial art was founded when people didn't have a lot to do. They're in a small village, all the Buddhist monk going to the monastery, the people they trained but they feel like they're a part of something great but those days that to be owed to discipline and make you do because there's nothing to do, it's easy to get students. Today, we compete today with 5,200 channels on Netflix, 80 TV channels and all kind of activities, all kind of comfort level so people still have to like who they're with. They train is not the art, it's the people. Look, even really bad people, what are they going to the gang when they know it's bad and doing bad things? Because they want to belong to something and when you look at the club, fraternity, sorority, different kind of club, people want to belong in the club to give them an identity of something bigger than themselves and maybe some people feel that need to belong is like an extended family and Cuong Nhu we call ourselves the art of love. We're the extended family and if you come and hang out and every year we have this international event, we don't call that a martial arts training weekend, we call that a family reunion and every time we have a weekend where we get together and train and they come in, they train, train and the last day we have a big party. We have dinner party. We have people stay over and talk and do anything but talk about martial art. We don't talk about martial art when we're not in our gi. Why? Because the informal organization is just as important as the formal organization and being the business person that I am, I realize that what's very important is not people don't go to you to do work at the house or the business because you're 5% more or less on the proposal but they do work with you because of who you are. They like you. They will have trust and they want to be around you and that same truth for business, same truth for clubs so why wouldn't it be same truth for Karate? Because most people, most students that join martial arts, they don't know kata 1, kata 5, kata 10, weapons but they join because the chemistry they have, how they feel when they walked in but you can't always sell this hype when you don't have a personal relationship with them and the moment you promise them a rank, this is dangerous. Extremely dangerous because you box yourself in a corner and when that time comes, you have to give that blue belt when even though she's not ready so now, you compromise your integrity because you promise something. It's almost like tell me about Economics, I will get a B. I go to class 3 times a week or maybe it may take me more than 6 weeks, may take me 8 weeks but you can't make that promise so once you do, and they know they didn't deserve it, they know it's bogus, eventually they quit and that's the big difference. You can't say you come here, you train hard 3 times a week for 8 weeks, you probably can get this rank. You don't. You can't even predict that. you say you train hard, you enjoy, your rank will come, you're going to earn it and you're going to love. In the meantime, you'll love everyday training instead of only 8 weeks or 12 weeks, you only love that one day you get promoted and that's why people get burned out instead of love the actual coming into class and that's our approach.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Where did this approach come from? Is this from you or from your father or someone else?



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**Quynh Ngo:**

From my dad because my dad loves to teach and it's kind of pass it on. He enjoyed teaching. He would show up on a Sunday at a public park to teach 2 students that fell behind during the week. He would tell them, why don't you come meet me out in the park under the tree and we'll just kind of work out for an hour and a half on Sunday and just catch you up on the class you missed and because when you look at your time as an instructor, it's the equal time as the student and you do it a few times, they value you and they don't want to let you down but if you look at your time as oh, I'm not going to teach 1 or 2 students then they feel that way is like going to the doctor's office. You sit there and you have to wait an hour and a half. You feel like this is bogus but if you're going to whip a place where they have high service, value, you have great service, maybe the food is not A+ but you walk out of there, you forget what the food taste like because you already swallow but you remember the service. You never forget the service and we look at Karate is like eating at a restaurant. They're not going to remember certain technique or how they can [00:51:53] but they remember the positive, friendly, wonderful, encouraging experience and they want that experience more than they want to learn a new kick.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Good stuff. Obviously, your father's been a huge influence on you but is there anyone else that when you consider who you are now as a father, as a man, as a martial arts instructor, as a martial artist, is there somebody else that's been really influential for you?

**Quynh Ngo:**

Well, I graduated from college and I worked with a boss and I'm a very calculated and thinking person and I remember he brought me in the office and told me, Quynh, don't forget: the good plan today is better than perfect plan tomorrow and then he looked at me and say, there might not be a perfect plan ever, you don't know and I realize in that moment that all my education to let me be me is gone because I won't do what I know in that moment and I worry about what someone think that I didn't show to them, this is really better than this or a certain way and basically, that was a profound moment in my life that you go do your best in that moment and you know better next time but if you don't do and you sit there and think about it, then you do nothing and when you do nothing, you give nobody your time and when you don't give them the time, you don't create new memories. So, I become a very giving man in many aspects because of that and then, through time, I realized that failure is doing something that you're less than capable of instead of some might do it sometimes better than you. So I evolved from when he said that XY told me that versus failure is about me not doing something that I should be doing versus about me getting a B in American History and somebody get an A. It doesn't matter because my B was the best I can get and I'm good with that so it shaped me to be a giving, content person and when you do it, your student would know that you love them. You give them what you got and they can feel that and they can feel you're a giving person and you're willing to show you, to be like you because you make them feel good by giving your time and energy and knowledge and they know that if they do the same for their friends or family or anything outside of martial art, even, it make them feel good and so





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they take time to emulate someone that...you know, our goal is we want your student to love you first. They respect you second. In martial art, traditionally, it's the other way.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Right.

**Quynh Ngo:**

Today's culture, if they love who you are, they will respect you, they will follow you. They look at you the leader but if you want to respect you first, whether that power, knowledge, power, longevity, whatever. That's a short term management. You can manage that process but you can't lead people with that. Eventually, people, they'll get to a certain level, they respect you but they don't love you enough to stay with you. You follow me? There's a difference so all our black belts, we have meetings, we always talk about...Karate is a small facet of life. When you teach students, you can come across that you're some superior human being because there's hundreds of other things that they know more than you and they don't call themselves superior to you. You can come across as something like that because intimidation doesn't mean the student don't bow to you. Yes, sensei, that's not what I'm saying here. The emotional aspect so with our style is actually really good at going for the heart first and the muscle second.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Great stuff, great stuff. We've talked a lot about the past. We've talked about today. Let's look into the future. I'm assuming you're not going to hang up your hat, so to speak, any time soon to stop teaching so what is it that keeps you motivated or, to say it in another way, do you have goals? Are there things you're trying to accomplish?

**Quynh Ngo:**

Yes, the style has legs on its own. It's kind of self-running. We have so many masters and taught instructors and students that respect the system in a sense that because the ownership is by everyone. The logo we have is owned by everyone. No one owns the logo. It belongs to everybody so that part, one day, I'm 54, but one day when I'm just kind of take half a step back, the student would know who the leader but the leader's really not ...you should lead to show them where to go because all our black belt and students, they know where to go. They're going the same spot I am. I'm basically there to hang on to get there with them because their spirit and energy and drive is exact like mine. I've been around longer but that doesn't mean my spirit's any better so I don't look at it that way. So, the style's in good hands no matter how we grow forward 10, 15 years, 20 years from now because of the cultural thinking but I have the kids on college now. I've actually started a motivational keynote speaking business to start in this month. It's been 6 years of planning and part of that is I want to help small business, business startup, business operation for people that don't have a good background in business but needs help and also I want to mentor and be a parental coach to parents that raising teenage children for young to



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college and part of that is the recognition of bringing back to basic. Most parents use the term tough love. In reality there's no such thing as tough love. It's called true love. You love your children, you put them first, their future first. You have to do what's right to them. Sometimes parents name it tough love because they don't want to do a certain thing to make them feel bad so they want to be a good guy so they're not willing to demand a certain thing out of children so they coined the term tough love so they don't have to do it. In reality is no, unconditional love mean you have to do it with respect for the children. You expect a certain behavior, certain character trait, certain training, certain respectfulness that comes with that, certain work ethic, that's for them. If you don't and you hand them a TV remote or buy them some game to play and leave you alone, that's conditional love. Basically, you love your children when your life's easy but reality is that's not true love so I want to coach that because I've been...I travel a lot, I see thousands of kids and I can see to retrain a program of behavior. I give you a simple example. Animal kingdom, when you see the animals, they have a hierarchy, right? How or why does parent walk in a restaurant and have their kid run all over and walk up and order stuff first? Your children should never ever order food before you in any circumstance when they're children because they have to watch how you behave when you walk in. That's how I take my kids to Burger King. They don't make a move. They don't say a word until I order respectfully so they can watch my behavior and how I do and how respectful it is. You teach them by watching and then they know the hierarchy is nothing moves until the alpha male or female move. Basically, the wolf hunt until the alpha wolf open the carcass, there's no cub that's going to run up and start eating, it doesn't work that way in our DNA so when the parent of the kid split ahead of them all the time, at the end of the day, that's when they train to do, they're ahead of you so when they're 14, 15, 16, they think they're ahead of you and the genetics kicks in that they want to box you to be the alpha of the household, so then people say teenagers are difficult, no, because they didn't know how to put them in the right mode so I want to work on the behavior and characteristics and traits and stuff for the parents to help the society to get to what it's supposed to. We're not talking about physical and mental and harassment and punishment, we're not talking about that. We're talking about treating them like an adult. Young adult at their level that makes sense. When my children have a birthday, I always tell them to make a Mother's Day card for their mom. Why that card for their mom? Why? Because they know that day, their mom did work and they have to appreciate that so they don't put them ahead and when we have a birthday cake, I let them blow out candles, all the friends come over and I cut one piece of cake for me, one for their mother and set aside and it's not like you steal the food, there's plenty and then the birthday boy or girl get to eat after we cut our piece up. Why? Nothing moves till the alphas gets their plate first even, I mean, it's just a basis for genetic disposition in animal kingdom and human. We should think that, oh, let your kid eat first, what's the rush? No, you let them do that for 10 years, they think they get it because you do. It doesn't work like that and so those are some of the simple thing that people miss. My son had an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, we brought some of his friends and stuff, going to a restaurant, we sat down, the waiters come up, oh, birthday boy sit with a little hat, he looked at him, what you want? He wouldn't say a thing. He looked over at me until she looked at me, until she take my order, he doesn't order and it's not like I'm eating his food, he's run out of food, that's not what I'm saying. But they have to know it's like in karate,



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martial art, there's a hierarchy. A green belt just doesn't run over and climb over and tell the brown belt, line up behind me, right? You don't line up a green belt ahead of a brown belt and a brown belt definitely line up in front of the black belt so why is it that you let your children line up in everything ahead of you? that doesn't make any sense. Anyway, so that's my new company. I want to break down to basics and it's about communication, it's about experience, it's about wisdom, it's about bringing young people back into daily life like martial art as the level of recognition, if you have your place in the sun, when it's your time, you get there but you're not more important than anybody else. You take your turn and you learn patience and you learn respect and you learn your self-control and I'm looking forward to take it outside of martial arts world because there more people, non-martial artists than martial artists.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Sure, yeah. Now, if people are listening and they want to learn more about you or your style or maybe they want to see if there's a school, a Cuong Nhu school nearby, where would they go on the internet?

**Quynh Ngo:**

Yeah, [cuongngu.com](http://cuongngu.com). They can go to [cuongngu.com](http://cuongngu.com) and go there and if you call any school that you're close by, if you want to come visit, stay for a week to train, you're going to find out it's almost like you walk into a group of people that you know for long time. Everyone is openminded, they're friendly, they're receptive. We don't have an ego, we don't flex our muscle, we don't have this bow down attitude at all. I mean, at all. We invite instructors from different arts to come to many of our events to teach their specialty and a lot about low rank and instructors taking those class and appreciate it and I myself actually take some of the classes myself and just really enjoying and thankful that someone showed us something that open our horizon a little bit so it's pretty cool.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I agree. I agree and I think it's more than pretty cool. I think it's wonderful and I think that you are setting the model for what I believe the future of martial arts, traditional martial arts school would be based around that culture, that family approach and I hope some of the folks listening who have influence will take notice for what you're saying. This has been a lot of fun.

**Quynh Ngo:**

I think what it is is a lot of people think that if you laugh and joke with your students outside class, they lose respect for you. if you give up 10% of what you think they lose respect for you and get 50% of love for you, you have the student a lot longer.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, there are a lot of people in the world that I respect but I have no desire to spend time with them.



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**Quynh Ngo:**

Right, because you don't love and enjoy your time like that but if you do, you love and enjoy your time and you're looking forward to that daily grind and love that aspect so in martial art, it's a volunteer thing. You pay and you make it inconvenient for you to go to class so the last thing you want to do is go there and feel more mental pressure or subject to an order. Because we're not training martial arts for survival anymore, it's more of an art. Training and discovering ourselves, is not a military thing where years ago, you train and take order so you do or you're out of here. The paradigm's shift, it changed. If you don't change with time, you're still driving that 1936 Ford car or 1968 Corvette, it's not going to run the same as a 2020 Corvette. It has the aesthetic and value on collection but if you come up performance, no chance. So, humans are like that. They have to feel wanted and loved and appreciated and instead of feeling you're lucky to be here so even ahead of the style, when I see a white belt come in, I teach them, I always thank them again, I appreciate you coming here and give us a chance to make you feel like you want to be part of this friendship and family here. Never, we say, I want you to get good, I want you to get your green belt, no, we never talk about Karate like that. We're talking about people.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

You shared so much today and I really appreciate your time and I thank you for everything you've done but I'd love to ask for one small favor as we start to wrap up here. What parting words, what advice would you offer to the folks listening today?

**Quynh Ngo:**

Very easy. We are who we are. You have to be true to yourself. When I say perspective, perspective they say is true, no. some of us put out this perspective of who we are. we're not true to ourselves so from a finance standpoint, if I make \$10 an hour and I can live with \$8, I should be wealthy because I can live within my means so don't paint the perspective in martial art with whatever rank you are if you put your ego where you want to think you're better than you are, in reality, if you're better than you, you should be happy so my parting words to everybody: keep your perspective and your self-esteem, self-worth first. You don't have to prove to anybody anything but prove to yourself and to finish up, when I was in college, they made me memorize this poem and the last three lines was this. I live by that. You may go down the pathway of life and get a pat on your back as you pass but the final result will be headache and tears if you cheated the man in the glass which is the mirror so if you cheated you, that's enough so you can lie and cheat and make this perception to feed for where does your life, your relationship, your martial arts skill is irrelevant. You learn to cheat you, it become a habit, a habit turn into your character and your character will be your destiny and so be true to yourself, be humble, love people because they're the one who makes you better and good luck to everybody.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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As we talked about today, I had a martial arts school of my own for a little while. We've talked about that on the show before but I have to say, this is the first time in 392 episodes that a guest made me want to open a school again. I loved teaching and I loved the opportunities that I have travelling around, working with people, but the way Grand Master Ngo talks about martial arts and teaching and family, I've been part of some of those schools and I hope those of you that have not been that fortunate will at least check out what they've got going on online with Cuong Nhu because it's pretty amazing stuff. Thank you, sir, for your time today. I really enjoyed our conversation and I hope our paths cross sometime in the future. You can find the photos and the links and everything that we've got going from today's conversation at [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) and of course, [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com) and the code PODCAST15 will get you 15% off everything that we make. If making a purchase isn't in your future, maybe you'll consider sharing an episode, maybe this one. Maybe you'll go somewhere like Apple podcast, iTunes store, whatever they call it these days and leave us a review. Maybe you'll make a comment on our social media, we're @whistlekick on YouTube, twitter, Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram and probably some others. We're all over the place and if you want some private conversation, if you want to reach out and leave a comment that you don't want anybody else to see, you can do that. [jeremy@whistlekick.com](mailto:jeremy@whistlekick.com), I read all of my own email. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!