



Episode 94 – Sifu Gary Cecil | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Gary Cecil:

There was always this belief that even if you aren't physically present with your master, that there was a form of communication that continued between one another.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello, everyone. It's episode 94 of whistlekick martial arts radio, the only place to hear the best stories from the best martial artists like today's guest, Sifu Gary Cecil. My name is Jeremy Lesniak and I founded whistlekick but I'm also your host here for martial arts radio. Whistlekick, I'm very proud to say, makes the world's best sparring gear and some awesome apparel all for those of you involved in traditional martial arts. Thank you to the returning listeners and hello and welcome to those of you checking us out for the first time. If you're new to this show or you're just not familiar with what we make, check out our sparring gloves. They're more comfortable, more durable. Basically, we took a standard design and found all the ways we could improve on it. If you're used to the normal foam sparring gear that falls apart, imagine those gloves but better in absolutely every way. You can learn more about our gear and the rest of our products at whistlekick.com. If all you want is gear, we're selling a lot of sparring gear on Amazon, seems like everyone likes the convenience of having us there and we're happy to oblige. If you're looking for show notes, those are on a different website, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com and while you're over there, get in on that newsletter action. We offer special content to subscribers, it's the only place to find out about upcoming guests for the show. We only email you a few times a month, never spam, never sell your info and sometimes, we send out a pretty generous coupon so nothing to lose there. On episode 94, we get to talk to Sifu Gary Cecil. A Kung Fu instructor who was suggested as a guest by one of his students. We had a great conversation and I found myself really interested in some of the things that Sifu Gary had to say. You might think that here we are close to a hundred episodes in, we've heard everything. Every background someone comes from in every way that you can view the martial arts but that's clearly not the case and Sifu Gary gave me plenty to think about during and after our chat. So, enjoy. Sifu Gary, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Gary Cecil:

Thank you. Glad to be here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's a pleasure to have you here. We were just chatting a little bit and of course, I appreciate your flexibility to let the listeners know that we've got some time zones between us and as time zones are wont to do, as anyone has ever sold across timelines knows, sometimes we get that math wrong and I appreciate your flexibility with working with me and not being offended that I called you too early the first time.

Gary Cecil:



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No, it was fine.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Of course, you're not on this show to talk about calendars and time zones. You're here to talk about martial arts so let's get started. How did you get started in the martial arts?

Gary Cecil:

I started as a young person. I was very fortunate. I was one of the young people that, of course, watched some of the earliest shows of martial arts that came out of the 60's and I remember Bruce Lee and his dynamic demonstrations of skills in the Green Hornet way back when and how inspiring Bruce Lee was to martial artists but had no opportunity for any real formal training much because I was a rural kid. Growing up in rural West Virginia, not much access to a whole lot of sophisticated martial arts schools but I read the magazines, had an interest and then I was fortunate enough to discover that there was a master who had come into town and had just gotten in from Okinawa and wanted to start a school and some of my friends were going to sign up from school and I jumped in with it and was off and on as I could with him and actually end up some of his student ended up being more of my primary instructors for a while and the art that was a blend between the Chinese kung Fu of southern china as if moved into Okinawa, some would call it Chinese Goju or [00:04:16] which is the same philosophy that Miyagi brought into Okinawa and then to Japan eventually. That is the hard and soft concepts in martial arts. My first exposure is really to more Okinawa-type hand fighting with the southern Shaolin influences on that plus how it has been adapted through Miyagi- Sensei so that's how I got started in it and spent some years just working with that stuff until I went to college and discovered that there was a Shaolin master I had access to. Actually, he kind of found me because I was teaching a martial arts class for the physical education department at my college. They had given me that opportunity for credit so I was helping out doing that for students, having a good time. One of these Shaolin master students came up to me in my class one day and the next thing you know I've been told or given an invitation to come visit. So, it happened in this school is through word of mouth, didn't advertise. It wasn't something that he was out trying to recruit but you got invited if someone thought you might fit in so that's how I got into the Shaolin side of it and my teacher back in West Virginia had actually encouraged that in me. He had worked with some in the Shaolin kung Fu side of it in his experience. We actually experimented with that a lot in our classes and so I was ready for it and we took it from there.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's cool so when you received that invitation, did you have any...was there any fear you were going to be challenged?

Gary Cecil:

Oh yeah, because I was leading...we were doing round sparring and people may know, goju is where sparring kind of originated the way that most people understand it now. It was an effort to try and



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practice without causing real harm and so, those early on, those artists had tried to devise ways and really, goju was one of those keenly involved in creating the sparring system. The Shaolin sparring was a little different. They sparred too, for hundreds of years, but theirs was heavy contact and it was rough. Ours was rough too, quite frankly, it was bare knuckles and you really had to stress control so, control was a key part of that training which I still appreciate, by the way, a lot. We don't have gloves on. You got to be careful but it also let us use our hands in different ways. I don't want to get off track there but...lets continue.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay, sure. Feel free to get off track. We're all about tangents here and often times, that's where the best stuff comes out. It's the things that we weren't planning to talk about or even the things that guests have come on and forgotten about which have people that have said even on the air, I haven't thought about this in 20 years kind of thing so please feel free to let it wander if that's where you want to take it.

Gary Cecil:

Yeah, but in a way, I guess my point was we're doing it. We're doing sparring but I thought my sparring was pretty good. At that time, I was 2nd degree black belt teaching at the college. I had a rude awakening. When I went down there and watched these guys doing Shaolin fighting, the master walks over and asks me if I want to fight and I looked at him and say no, I don't think I'm ready for this yet and that may have been actually what accepted me into the school because I feel this humility he was looking for. He had a lot of black belts walk in with chips on their shoulders and challenging and thinking they're hot stuff. I was the first one to actually come in and say I think I need to learn from you and he accepted me.

Jeremy Lesniak:

To borrow, probably the most used, martial arts cliché, empty your cup, right? You were there to learn.

Gary Cecil:

That was it. I think I was the only one during that period of time whoever did that for, quite frankly. Most of the other black belts didn't stay. They were either beat up so bad they left or they were carried out. It was not nice if you came in with an attitude, you got humbled real fast but I realized I was in over my head. I did get to spar but I sparred one of his middle-rung guys who humiliated me, quite frankly.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Really?

Gary Cecil:

Oh, it was one of the most humiliating but most enthralling things I ever experienced. I never had a guy disappear on me before and this was a green belt in the Shaolin school and he puts me in there with him



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and we're going bare knuckles, though he liked to use gloves which to me was like gloves, wow, I never used gloves. We got together and this guy just disappeared right in front of me. I'm standing, looking around, where did he go? It was one of the best things I've ever seen and when he tapped me on the shoulder and I turned around and he smiled at me, I looked at the teacher and said, I'm in this class if you'll have me. Teach me that technique! Oh, it was just fabulous. I was embarrassed but just thrilled at the same time, if that makes sense.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's a pretty incredible experience to go to another school and realize how much more there is that you can learn and I think that the more you have learned at one school or another school, the more overwhelming that feeling can be. I've experienced it a few times and it's terrifying but so exciting.

Gary Cecil:

Exactly. I was so glad to be there and I was so glad to be allowed to participate with the higher ranks of his school because that was only a privilege granted by the sifu and on my part, it was a gift. I hadn't been there as long as the others. I didn't necessarily earn it the way they did and I realized that so I always try to be open and respectful because some of them had paid their dues in much better ways than I had but he had said it, he said I'd paid my dues in my other training and I'd trained hard and he respected that but it was his decision, his call and I was very flattered and honored that he accepted me in his high ranks so basically, it's a closed door school is what we're talking about.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Interesting. Did you learn how to disappear?

Gary Cecil:

Uh, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

How long did that take you to learn?

Gary Cecil:

I don't know if I did as well as that green belt did. He was just exceptional. We teach that technique in all of our schools now. I teach it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Oh cool. So of course, that's a great story and we didn't even go into it looking for a story like that.

Gary Cecil:



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There's bunches of 'em so let's just keep going.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right? Tangents, tangents. We're all about tangents. Do you have another one if somebody were to put you on the spot and say what's your best martial arts story? What would you tell them?

Gary Cecil:

There's many, many. There's so many. I don't know either I think one of the things that comes to mind about the potential stories itself is I was inducted in the U.S. Martial Arts Hall of Fame in 2009 and I came in that year, we were in Nashville, Tennessee. It was largely attended by the Black Dragon Society and I guess they had some stuff going on that I wasn't aware of or some apology they made back and forth between various people and whatever it was, I was very much aware of the history of the Black Dragon Society as were some of my students who were there with me and I'm not going to get into any of that because that's their business but the opening ceremonies have a story and stories can be good stories or they can be distracting stories. I listened to this story being told at that event, wear black tie, all these famous martial artists in the room. I was inducted with Dukes. The guy with the movies made about with Van Damme. Frank Dukes. He was there with me and some others to be inducted in the Hall of Fame and I guess it had some history with these folks but the story that started the whole thing off has left us puzzled ever since. I mean, my students left there going what was that? It made no sense to us. This encounter, everything we did or knew and I don't want to be disparaging because I'm not naming names but sometimes a story is...not every story should be told, I guess is what I'm saying. Stories themselves have power and they can instruct us and sometimes it can also leave us shaking our heads and I hope I don't do that in this interview at all but that's one experience about storytelling that I found as a caution. I love the stories but we need to think them through a little bit and make sure why we're telling it and what we're trying to say.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I agree.

Gary Cecil:

So, that's a story about stories.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Took it a very different angle than anyone else has and I like that.

Gary Cecil:

Unfortunately, for the person that told it then, he might not have realized that we took it that way and that school had used that story as a joke now for years but meaning that with no disrespect because I



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think the intention of that story was different than the way we took it. I don't think it was ever intended to be used in that way now and I admit that but it was rather humorous too. We just find it amusing. At the same time, anyway, that's just one aside but it is a caution about when I do tell these stories, I'm trying to accomplish something with my students and that is to encourage them, to fascinate them with the art, to make them hungry for experiences of the art that will feed them and build them up. That's what I'm after.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And that's all any of us should really want. That's the goal, or at least, one of them. One of the major goals, of course.

Gary Cecil:

In other words, it's not about me or just how wonderful I am or how wonderful some of my teachers have been but just a story that really taught us all and I think that because I am, in essence, a warrior priest. I am actually an ordained minister who also is a, at the highest level of my particular art and in the truest of the Shaolin traditions, that was the way it's been and so I'm a story teller by profession on both sides as a martial artist and as a minister and so I found the power of stories to be quite amazing at times.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool. Let's go back. Let's pretend that you're in school back in West Virginia and that gentleman doesn't come back from Okinawa, doesn't open a school and you don't find martial arts, where do you think you'd be in your life now.

Gary Cecil:

I would have found martial arts or martial arts would have found me. For some reason, I am convinced that the art was going to find me if I didn't find it and I know it's hard to explain. Some might call it predestination but I just...there's no way I could avoid it. It was going to find me. Even before this teacher came from Okinawa, I was already interested enough and I was beginning to seek out the information. I would have eventually found a class. I would have found my way somewhere else. My bet would have been, the first thing that I would end up doing is aikido. Still one of my favorite arts and I would likely find a class somewhere. I'm convinced of that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Why do you think you would have sought out aikido versus something else?

Gary Cecil:

Because of aikido's philosophy. The gentle art in its own respect. It's an art, and you probably had some aikido people on before, it's an elegant, gentle art that can be very violent. Don't take me wrong. It can be very painful but its approach is one more of truly defensive and cultivating the spirit in a way that



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we're not trying just to be harmful to someone but simply not wishing the energy to cause destruction any further than it needs to and redirecting that energy. I just like the whole philosophy of the aikido 17:49 and some other phrases that one that planted that and it influenced me a lot early on.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool.

Gary Cecil:

And being a minister, you can see why that would appeal to me too.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely.

Gary Cecil:

That, in a sense, you learn to turn the other cheek but when I turn that cheek, if it falls down then I'm sorry, I just turned my cheek. His force worked against him.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Where did your ministry come into play chronologically? Is this after college or something you started in college?

Gary Cecil:

Sort of simultaneously in college. At the time, I was introduced to the Shaolin school which doesn't call itself that upfront. It's the American school but it teach Shaolin art. I was already committing myself to a viable religion major in college, went on to seminary from there and that's one reason why I couldn't stay for more years and more time into all the school where I was going because I needed to move on and finish my education and so forth. I knew the time was coming. I needed to just move on and do what I could to enjoy the art and grow in the art without the benefit of being in the class any longer and I made it a point to do just that and share the wealth as I knew it and teach what I knew but also to continue growing as best I could. I was always seeking out more opportunities to learn something along the way too. It became...martial arts became a hobby for me in regard to ministry but also a tool. The struggle that some people have there is a real keen struggle between a violent art and a religion that teaches love your enemy and turn the other cheek and how do those two things work together. I had to resolve that conflict in myself somewhere along the way and I did. I'm very much at peace with it all. Part of the art, being for me, is a means of self-development and personal improvement, personal discipline and challenge that I could apply some constructive ways in my life. When I started a class at the University of North Dakota, it was through the church as an outreach into the university but not too much just to do evangelism but just to get some kids together who had nothing better to do who might be interested in the art and build some relationships and see where that would go from there. I didn't



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preach at them but I did offer the stories and the moral lessons and began to, at least, express where I think faith is key in understanding the arts. My teacher was a Christian, by the way, my Shaolin teacher. That worked against him by the early 70's. Working with the Buddhist, there came a point in his ranking as a high disciple when his faith became an issue and they didn't want to promote him because he was Christian and they were Buddhists and there was a prejudice. Bruce Lee also was fighting the same fight as to his having the right to teach Occidentals beyond a certain level. My teacher has gone through the same fight where his teacher came to bat where he might be white and he might be Christian but he should be here and there was a big ensuing disagreement in the Shaolin circles about that whole thing that paralleled what Bruce Lee was fighting for around the same time period, I guess, that was fascinating in itself. I'm not going to get into the whole story but, in essence, my teacher with his master and another person voluntarily withdrew from that group of Shaolin priests and continued training on their own to finish it out, literally left the temple to finish the training because of prejudice and religious discrimination. We've come a long way. Those pioneers fought the fight for us like my teacher and like Bruce Lee and some other masters willing to step up and say, I don't accept that, we need to move forward. I feel privileged to have known someone that was part of that fight and have been taught by someone who understood the price paid to bring this martial arts as we know it today, freely given to us regardless of race or background. When I started teaching, I had the same openness. I wasn't going to discriminate with students. They didn't have to be Christians to study with me. We were just going to get together and build relationships and have a great time together and discipline ourselves and see where it led and that's what happened.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think that the best schools are founded with that, for at least one of the ideals, and certainly that's an interesting into a time period that I don't think a lot of us think about when we think about the martial arts and the difficult early times. We think about the challenges being around availability of instruction and sharing knowledge and things being a little bit more brutal in the instruction style but I don't know that I've ever heard anyone talk about being discriminated against for their faith in this country in the context of martial arts training but, of course, people aren't always...people are fallible, I guess, is a better way to put it and there's a great example of it.

Gary Cecil:

Yeah, and again, that's old history now. Shaolin folks, as I understand it, and my teacher actually shared this at some point, they broke off and continued training and did their own thing. He opened his own school and admittedly, said what you're doing here is...I broke away from the Shaolin temple. They re-approached him years ago. Actually, I guess, with an apology. We've come a long way. I don't want to leave it at this discrimination and so forth as the final word. It was by no means the final words. We moved well past that. now, he chose not to reaffiliate with them even though they advised him to because he was happy and doing what he wanted to do but they did come back later on and basically, acknowledged that his school was superior and they respect what was he was doing and wanted him in



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the fold and tried to make it up to him. I thought that was a good sign in itself of how far we've come. You're right. We don't talk about these things anymore. That's 30, 40...long time ago that these vitals were faults but our ancestors in the faith, our forefathers had to endure some of that and I don't forget it so I brought some of that spirit into my school too. I was just glad to have these students. Anybody who's getting bored with the school, want something constructive to do, come along and check us out and we just have a great time together and the organization that I'm now in charge of began, technically, it began there and has grown ever since so some of the great lessons I learned from my teachers that I've passed on to how we organize now and how we conduct ourselves now, those have paid off and have worked and we have very dedicated students.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's great. Life isn't always roses, right? I mean we all go through some challenges; some struggles and I'm guessing that you probably got a story somewhere in there about one of your struggles and how your martial arts experience helped you through it?

Gary Cecil:

I don't know if I have a great story about that directly. My struggle was that internal one between reconciling what can be a violent art with a gentle faith which was not an ongoing dialogue within myself a lot for some years and accepting criticisms. I remember teaching at a YMCA in North Carolina. I agreed to teach a Tai Chi class for the community. I don't charge, by the way, when I teach those classes. It's what I consider community service so I'm not trying to do it in the spirit other than simply I enjoy the art, love to share it, want everybody healthy so I'm a local pastor, I'm at the Y, I'm teaching this class and to have some Christians come in and began to criticize what I'm doing saying that it's hedonistic and pagan and I'm teaching false doctrine and misleading people, et cetera, et cetera. Those moments hurt. Hurts when people don't understand what you're trying to do and want to label you that you're some sort of demon because you're using an Eastern concept and some exercises that are Eastern to work with some people for their health. I knew where I stood on this. I knew what I was trying to accomplish and was not in conflict with faith but there's some people that just don't understand the art very well or have these...they impose their own conception on it or impose their own prejudices, again, and I had to face some of that. That, somehow, in other more conservative circles like the conservative South, there's that risk that when you do martial arts, you're somehow another operating in a different arena than the faith that these people understand so I've always had to deal with that. It's not really been one in particular story other than I can think of the YMCA one, for instance. Just hearing that criticism there with these folks that walk in at the start saying things.

Jeremy Lesniak:

How did you respond?

Gary Cecil:



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At first, you just keep teaching your class, ignore them and at another point, because, basically I said, you know what? You shed nothing by their fruits, folks. We're doing something good here and these people feeling healthier. I think God is into health. God wants us to be our well-being is important to God. Just check out and I can give them a bible in some of that but if you don't believe that God's interested in our health and well-being then I don't think we're talking about the same religion here. That's about what I said. Of course, I can give you a long theological explanation there but I'm not going to do that on this show. We'll stay on martial arts side of it but the religious part of it, the Shaolin were religious people doing their art.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We've kind of dabbled in this subject a little bit on this show. The idea that there is a, if not a bind between martial arts and faith, they were at least complementary and when we take a step back and one of the things that has come up on the show is that most of our guests and, I'm going to speculate, a good portion of our listeners, at least, view martial arts, traditional martial arts as a tool for personal development.

Gary Cecil:

Exactly,

Jeremy Lesniak:

And when we look at it in that way, the comparisons between martial arts and faith really aren't that different and I know, for me personally, and the two absolutely are not just complimentary but do have overlap.

Gary Cecil:

I think you got it. I have taken some of the principles of martial arts, at times, and applied them to the faith arena in that in which I serve and at the same time, in the faith arena, it helps inform martial arts circle so there is a constant dialogue back and forth informing one another where one lives, where one stands. When do you take a stand? For what do you stand? And what is important? How should you respond to violence? We're in a time now and I'm talking to my instructors now about the importance of really getting reality specific about where we are and what we're teaching our students. A lot of what we do is we have fun. My classes are fun. We work hard but there has to be a sense of personal gratification and reward in that we like to laugh, we like to tell stories on each other. A lot of humor, lightheartedness in the midst of serious training and that's part of what makes it successful but at the same time, you're learning serious techniques that can really defend yourself in a dire situation and I just think that we're living in that time now that we're even on higher alert. I don't know how to say this but I simply sent a note out saying, you can see what's been happening with threats of terrorism that are getting closer and closer to home. I've got a school in Minneapolis and there's a huge Somali population up there and I'm not disparaging the Somalis at all but within that group of people, there



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have been a few that have been caught and captured trying to be supporters of ISIS and that's close to home with my schools. They're in the midst of that situation where you have a lot of folks brought in as refugees and most of them are just out to work hard and try to make a living and take care of the families but it remains a question mark that within that culture, somewhere, there maybe a few individuals that could be a problem. Again, I'm not trying to cast any aspersions on other people but we all need to be alert in what we're doing in our classrooms, make sure that you're talking about what happens if you're in the theater and somebody comes in the back of the theater and opens fire. Look at the new scenarios we're dealing with. What happens if you go to a dance and someone comes in a tries to reap havoc? We are in serious times now and I just want my school to stay alert and make sure the training is updated to these possible scenarios. We're actually working on this stuff now. What would you do? Call in law enforcement, find out what's legal, what's one to morally and ethically do. These are big questions for us today.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right, right and it's interesting that it wasn't that long ago that the experience someone took away from a traditional martial arts school was enough to keep them safe. First and foremost, because it gave them the confidence that other people tended to, on a deeper level, recognize and not mess with you. Somebody's confident, they are rarely the target so I think that that is where the benefit to traditional martial arts training has been for the most part but we are now, at this point in time, that there are other threats that aren't going to evaluate that confidence. I don't want to say it's irrelevant but in those scenarios, it is.

Gary Cecil:

The important thing is, too, I agree to everything you've said there and the analysis but, in the most of my experience, the important thing too is in a stressed situation, it's interesting. Someone can step up and take leadership while others do nothing. Fear will freeze people or they simply follow but they're not...you need that someone who, either has been trained or confident enough, that says here's what we're going to do and then, people will follow someone like that. my students are the type if something bad happens, they need to know how to act and not freeze. You need to do something. I'm just hoping they're prepared, they're getting their minds prepared to be the people who act on behalf of others to save lives and do the right thing without hesitation so if we could build individuals like that, there can be leaders in their community and do the right thing to save lives, I'm a very happy instructor.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think most instructors will agree. Most would likely have the same yardstick to measure by. Now, other than, say, your first instructor in West Virginia and your original sifu as you're going to school, if we were to take those two out, who would you say is the most influential person in your martial arts upbringing? I like when an answer starts with a laugh.

Gary Cecil:



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In my upbringing, you're talking about early on then?

Jeremy Lesniak:

At any point. Someone, if we look at the whole of your martial arts career, who's contributed the most for you, with you?

Gary Cecil:

Other than those two primary folks?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. Yeah and we take those two out because we usually get some fun answers, some unexpected answers coming in.

Gary Cecil:

And this is not looking at someone at a distance or someone you admire or looking hands-on?

Jeremy Lesniak:

However, you want to define it.

Gary Cecil:

Because, admittedly, first of all, I'll do a two-part answer. I was right there when we got into this whole thing with Bruce Lee's first appearance on TV. I joined with thousands, I'm sure, who were just as fascinated by what Bruce Lee brought to the screen so he was one of my first exposures that really get me interested in something like that and I always give him credit. They really showed Kung Fu even though David Carradine was not really a martial artist but look good and that was supposed to be Bruce Lee's role but, again, there's that prejudice because he was actually Chinese. I think that worked against him. I don't know if you knew that background because there was something in that as well, that role.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, we did a whole episode talking about the history of Bruce Lee and personally, I put in quite a few hours of research, pulling in a lot of those things and yeah, it's quite clear that that role was written for him and then some higher ups at the production house..

Gary Cecil:

From a distant sight, I have great admiration for the earliest pioneers bringing it to America. They influenced me to get, open my eyes and I said, wow, I want to do something. On a personal level, though, actually it was the classmate of mine at school who got me started in that first class who just stayed beside me through high school, training with me. He's not doing the martial arts anymore but



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Michael was one of my best friends and Michael Clarry, he continued to train with me and encouraged me along the way that kept me into it and kept me going to the point that I was, when I went off to college, I said I'll continue it there to college which left the doors open for further developments so it's not someone out there that you would really, I can't give you some great story of some bigger than life person that walked into my life, it's just the ordinary martial artist who loved what he's doing and other than my main characters, Michael has great influence on me with my life hands on as my best friend and then just watching at a distance, Bruce Lee getting this whole thing started. I enjoyed the other guys that came along. Segal was fun to watch. That's Hollywood and it really did promote an interest in the arts but for me, I'm old enough that I appreciated it early on so it got me started.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, do you remember your first Bruce Lee movie? We're testing a theory I'm curious.

Gary Cecil:

My first Bruce Lee movie, which one was it? I think the first movie I saw, other than the TV shows, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure. Or, but let me break it out, the first time you saw him, I guess?

Gary Cecil:

I think was the Green Hornet and the episode that I remember to this day and was unscripted by the way was when they told him to go under this room and do something and he goes in and he jumps way up in the air and kicks the lights out which was about 7 or 8 feet up which was not in the script and that's where everybody, the people behind the camera go holy cow, what did we just see him do? They left it in because it was an amazing thing where he walks his room and jumps up and does a kick, kicks the lightbulb out and I'm going wow! That's my first recollection of Bruce Lee.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It seems that, especially for Bruce Lee, people have very vivid memories of the first time that they saw him. Be it the first movie they saw, the first TV show and whatever it was, to hold a very high place for them. I don't know about you and whether or not you still watch or would watch the Green Hornet but we've had plenty of people on this show who saw one of his movies and when we ask them how they got started, it's quite often I saw this Bruce Lee movie and when we get to the part, what's your favorite martial arts movie? It is still that movie and that happens very often on this show.

Gary Cecil:

I bet you get a lot of Enter the Dragon, don't you?

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Yeah, Enter the Dragon is definitely the most popular answer for him. That was the movie that pretty much launched martial arts in the 70's in America.

Gary Cecil:

Sure did! I enjoy it. I think my first movie was the big boss known as Fist of Fury and still fun but to this day, comical too, though. That's the thing that we started learning is these movies have a comic edge to them and when he kicks a guy to the wall and there's this perfectly symmetrical human shape in the wall.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Dry wall doesn't break that way.

Gary Cecil:

That was my favorite, I just start laughing like look at that! So, anyway, I remember that too. It was one of my first memories for the movie was that so, yeah, it's hard to get around what he did to us and this country by bringing it to America, exposed things to it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Have you participated in competition at all?

Gary Cecil:

Most of my competitions would've been in-house and that was by design. None of our schools trained for competitions. The problem we had with that is, and we tested this theory out by the way, in the Shaolin school, they fight really hard and you get disqualified really fast in those days because of the over excessive contact or whatever and we also realized it wasn't safe for other people. When you train in an environment, you get used to that intensity then you learn how to defend yourself. If you go up against a more classically trained Korean artist who might be very confident, but play by a certain set of rules and the way they do things, I'm not saying it was unfair but, in a way, it would be because contact was not as intense in some of those schools just like the way I began of learning to pull your punches, openhand fighting, you didn't make contact in certain ways because it's forbidden and those guys when they are just going there like crazy and it was really more like what people might be more accustomed to today with kickboxing but early on, low ranks train like that and these guys just got started hitting so hard that competitions didn't meet their needs nor would we have been welcomed in some of those competitions. I trained a student early on and we entered him into a national competition and he won it so nationally, we're one for one.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Those are good numbers.

Gary Cecil:



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Those are our numbers. We've had other competitions where I've trained a student or two from other schools and they always either won or ranked high up there or something. We have a form we'd teach that win everywhere it goes and in regional competitions and national so we have very good success rate when we do something competitively. I personally didn't do the Nationals scene. I just didn't have the desire but we did throw a few of our people in, one or two times to see how we did and we did fine. It's funny you don't train for it, you walk in, you walk out, champion. It's kind of a strange feeling sometimes but we have a good time with it but we don't train that way and we wish them well. Those who enjoy as a competitive sport, we appreciate them and appreciate what they do. Just not our preference or direction we'd take in our circles.

Jeremy Lesniak:

If you could train with someone that you haven't yet and we'll even open up to people that have passed on, who would you want to train with?

Gary Cecil:

That's a good question because I think I had trained with the best. Seriously, my teacher may have been one of the best in the world, though he's not well-known. He said that his master told him in the Shaolin circles, he's one of the top 6 in the world so I was glad to train with him. I still would not change that at all. I'll train with him but if I had a second person to train with, I don't think I would train with Bruce Lee. I don't think I could deal with him because he seems awesome because Bruce Lee is Bruce Lee and I did train with a student that my teacher said was probably as good as Bruce Lee and he was a little too intense for me so I would stay away from Bruce Lee. I think I would've enjoyed Chuck Norris and probably could've but I would've enjoyed Chuck Norris, I would've enjoyed Bong-soo Han, hapkido, back in the day. I think he was a really neat guy. Ed Parker would've been fun to train with as well in Kenpo so there's a lot of difference out there but if I had my number one choice, I would've loved to be a student, I think, other than with my master, Miyagi-sensei. Miyagi, goju. I think he'd be fascinating to work with.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think anytime you talk about someone that originated a style, I think the ability to train with them, not, for me, not so much for the physical instruction but for the mental concepts. Why did they choose these movements, these forms, these set of martial arts stuff to become their curriculum? To kind of get in their head.

Gary Cecil:

Exactly. That's the kind of research I've been doing for years for the benefit of my school is been that direction. I've continued to go back and look at some of those old Miyagi direction he was taking with some of the forms and why he chose these moves, the influence of southern Shaolin when he studied in China and breaking them down and continuing to learn from them. We don't teach those forms per se



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but I find some of the movements that were part of the white crane system or the dragon system that made it down to Fujian area, those southern style of martial arts from the Shaolin and the five ancestors. It's influenced us a lot. You see the connection, similar movements, that moves that influence a lot of stuff and it's been really fun to make the connections between what became known later as Karate which used to be the China Hand and its rooted in those Southern China arts. I spent a good bit of time, research on that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Interesting. We just did an episode, in addition with the interview episodes, we have episodes that come out on Thursdays on topics and that's, we profiled Bruce Lee for one of them and did another on, for anyone that doesn't know the name Bong-soo Han, you've probably seen the most famous thing he's done which is that famous kick scene out of Billy Jack.

Gary Cecil:

The second movie, I think Billy Jack.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, with that I'm going to take my right foot and put it on the right side of your face and there's nothing you can do about it. That was Bong-soo Han.

Gary Cecil:

No, no, that was Billy Jack.

Jeremy Lesniak:

No, no, he was the stunt double for that scene.

Gary Cecil:

Oh, really?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, because he was the one that taught Tom Laughlin hapkido and for that scene, they decided that Tom Laughlin's hapkido scene wasn't quite there.

Gary Cecil:

So, they doubled in Bong-soo Han to do that kick in the first movie?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, so he's the one to do that kick.



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Gary Cecil:

Oh well, and that's a classic to this day as far as I'm concerned. One of the best scene ever.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely. So much fun but one of the other ones that we did recently was on martial arts weapons and how you can track the flow of swords and everything moving from China to Korea to Japan over the years. Almost everything that's happened with martial arts on a large scale seems to have originated from China and flowed through to Japan. I found that fascinating.

Gary Cecil:

Exactly and Okinawa was the key. That's the point. Okinawa being closest to the main land where it's located was right straight across from Fuzhou area was key because that was where you got this blend of the Shaolin arts then moving towards the islands and being tweaked to accommodate the culture and the thought process but you still feel a lot of the original white crane and tiger fist and monk fist, dragon and all that shows itself in those Miyagi style forms coming from that training over more so than a lot of the peers later when it gets further down to Japan. There is, that's what I'm talking about the Chinese goju is part of the evolution that we get into Japanese karate and I'm closer to the Shaolin side of that, you see, and that was the leap that my teacher made when he came from Okinawa is that he brought with him the whole film and stuff to. They've done a southern Shaolin Kung Fu and that part of his orientation back in the day with Miyagi's goju, studying under someone who studied under Miyagi was this love for the Shaolin influence so the way I trained, I really had this original [00:51:38] which is the Chinese word for hard/soft. That was more what I was starting in and that's why I think it gave me such a love for Shaolin when I got a chance to do that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Neat! That's really cool. We've talked a little bit about movies before. Do you have a favorite overall martial arts movie?

Gary Cecil:

I chuckle because having met Frank Dukes and since he and I both share the same honor and his reputation which gets debated by some. That he did what he said he did or not, I don't know any of the answers to those things. I think the movie that Van Damme did about Frank Dukes, Bloodsport, is a very violent movie but it's supposed to represent force, again, the first white guy to find his way into the underground arts competition. Again, bridging that gap, going to the ceiling upon your type thing. That, I like that concept in the movie a lot. I like that whole thing. I'm also a big Jackie Chan fan. We've got a little connection. He's an honorary member of our organization and whether Jackie didn't directly acknowledge it but we informed him that he'd been inducted into our organization.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

So, you get to claim him now, absolutely!

Gary Cecil:

Yeah, one of my instructors knows Jackie Chan and he's just hard to reach. He's hard to get a hold of but his movies, his was so fun. He's a great entertainer and I like some of his...my favorite Jackie Chan...I guess my favorite movie, I'm trying to think of the name of it is the wooden...the Shaolin wooden man is what it's about when he trained in Shaolin and has to fight the wooden soldiers.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm not familiar with that but I'll look it up.

Gary Cecil:

And, anyway, it's actually along the same stories that I was told by my teacher and my training partner whose name is Wong Chung Wing who would tell me these stories from China and the legends that Jackie Chan and would then make movies about. These stories are famous and he'd star on these movies based on the legends I was hearing verbally from my Chinese training partner and which really made them come to life which is why I'll hear the stories and then, no, there's a movie. Holy cow! It was just fun. Shaolin wooden...I think Shaolin wooden man was what it's called by Jackie Chan. That's probably my favorite.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool and we'll definitely check that out and link to it in the show notes for anybody that might be new to the show, whistlekickmartialartradio.com. we post all of the stuff we talk about in the episodes over there. I think I might know the answer but I'll ask the question anyway. Who's your favorite martial arts actor?

Gary Cecil:

I'm laughing because I like so many of them. Not just to give a sentimental answer because sentimentally, I guess, it'd be Jackie Chan but I mean, Bruce Lee's movies are great but Bruce Lee wasn't a great actor. He was intense but he's more of a performer than an actor so I guess, maybe I'm splitting words. I think Jackie Chan's a true entertainer. The guy really, he trained for that. That's what he trained in the Chinese Opera was to be an entertainer and so I think Jackie Chan's going to be my final answer on that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay. How about books? Are you, at all, a reader? Any martial arts books that come to mind?

Gary Cecil:



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Yeah, yeah. What I've been working with more recently and just glad to have a copy of, McCarthy's Tradition of the Bubishi that was published and that's been a good work to fill in a lot of gaps about the history of martial arts going into Okinawa and to Japan and tracing it back to its southern Shaolin roots. It's just a good work overall and I've been recommending it to all my students, my teachers to make sure they get a copy of that and read that. so much of it sounds familiar to me from back when we were doing it orally, getting the same kind of lessons and stuff from my teachers and then to see it all cataloged and pulled together from the old shell and bronze man and then some of the Wu Dang influence are all kind of pooled together in there. My school, for instance, we're in adherence with the third and sixth final striking points, more so, and that's logged in there too with some comparisons and disagreements. It's hard to pin it down but I have really appreciated that work a lot. I think it's Paul McCarthy. That's a good work.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, certainly you're still active and you're exploring, you're researching things so it must mean that you've got some goals. There's some stuff that you're trying to accomplish. Would you mind telling us a bit about what you're working towards?

Gary Cecil:

That's an interesting question because a lot of what we've done has been by grace. So, I would say I just wanted to teach over the years and had no idea that we would become a full-fledged incorporated organization and association of this caliber that we are now. That was not a goal. It evolved that way because what we were doing has brought people's attention and time. It grew because it was a worthy project so everything I've got so far has been gravy, quite frankly. I had no intention of ever getting this far. Because, to me, it's just fun. I do it because I enjoy it. I do it because I respect it and appreciate its discipline. I mean, its opportunities for personal development, like you said earlier. It's one of our big values, this thing and Wu Chi Kung Fu, as I call it, really found me. That's a whole other story but I had already developed a philosophy and wrote a book for my school, it's called the Circle and the Serpent, to outline my principles based on my training and I had inspiration and, quite frankly, a sort of revelation, you might call it, and I called this thing that I was describing, Wu Chi [00:59:12] Wu Chi Kung Fu. I get word out about that and suddenly, I get contacted by a rather obscure group of people who say to me, welcome to the, welcome to our circles. There's a Wu Chi Chan martial art out there. There's a whole system and what you described is us. Cool! I had no clue you existed but together, we have come to the same place and the same conclusion in our journey independently of each other and yet, we share the same values. It was an amazing discovery and so, I'm back into this whole thing to begin with and I think it has more, I think martial arts has a goal for me rather than me having a goal for it. I believe that Wu Chi Kung Fu maybe continuing to impose its will on me along the way. That may be a strange answer but again, I don't think I found it as much as it finding me. It may sound esoteric or a little bizarre but that's kind of my experience with it. Interesting question, I would reverse it. Do you wonder what the goals are Wu Chi Chan for me? I just discover some of them.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

I think the only people that would call that a bizarre answer or, at all, disparage it aren't training themselves because it doesn't take very long in your martial arts training to know that sometimes it gets a little weird. We, as martial artists, we can be a weird bunch and I think the more you give yourself over to your training and just kind of let it happen, let it take you where it's going to go, the more good stuff happens.

Gary Cecil:

And there's some good science out there now. Actually, there are theories that I can't get fully into because I'm not totally qualified but the new particle science is out there and explore how the universe is sort of a repository of sorts. There's nothing lost in this universe including knowledge and that there is some sort of repository of things that one's subconscious makes a tap into, at times, knowledge that may seem revelation but it's floating around out there and an open mind to it actually receives it. That's not just craziness now. They're actually talking about that in some of the particular theory stuff that's out there now, quantum physics, they're talking about that very thing. A scientist can explain it better but it's not so far off with what my experience has been is that somehow there are other times that I feel like I've tapped into some sort of repository of images and impressions that have influenced me and even explains why I don't know why I know certain techniques. I've never been shown those techniques yet I know them as if I've known them forever. I've shared with my students at times where I've had a dream of a technique and a lot of us called and I say I've never seen it and then six months later find the technique. It's just strange and I don't really know how to explain it other than maybe quantum physics is onto something.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think we're in a pretty exciting time in science where science is starting explain some of the things that some of us have believed for a long time so I think that would be interesting to see where that goes but if someone wants to get a hold of you in your area, they're travelling through, they want to reach out to you, maybe come train, how would they get a hold of you and what else you have going on that people might be interested in?

Gary Cecil:

I'm glad to talk with anyone about the art. Again, for me, there remains my love but more of a hobby. I don't do it for salary. I do it, I teach two classes here locally of Tai Chi [01:03:21] just out of my love for my community and my friends and those are open to anyone. Anyone can come talk to me, gladly, I'll tell them, sharing my stories or my experiences and help them any way that I can. They can reach me by my phone number. The audience you have, most part you think is pretty responsible audience, I'm not going to get a lot of prank calls.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely, no, no. I haven't heard anything for that and what we'll do rather than some people are very open and we put the phone number in the show notes rather than doing that, why don't you say it a couple times and if someone truly wants to talk to you, they'll do so. I have faith in this audience.

Gary Cecil:

Okay, great. I knew you'll understand my caution.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely.

Gary Cecil:

I don't want someone calling me up and saying I'm an older guy now. I'm not interested in challenging, being challenged by anybody. I'm well past that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

To my knowledge, and I'll admit, we don't keep tabs on every guest that's come through. As far as I know, they're all still alive so I don't think you have to worry.

Gary Cecil:

If I can be of any help and insight for anyone, my cell number is area code 561-351-4434. Again, that's area code 561-351-4434.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, you mentioned a book you wrote for your students, is that at all available to others? Is that published?

Gary Cecil:

It's not published through a major publication. We have our own internal publishing. We could provide a copy. I have an administrator who is also running a school in Minneapolis area who can get copies to anybody that might want them. I also have a manual for my chi kung technique which is completely unique in the area field Chi Kung, too, that I'm teaching was affirmed by a Grand Master out of Beijing as being good, another word is legitimate, chi kung form to teach and it's...but I found that...I've been sharing that to the public. I've been sharing that to the public and we have a little manual for that if someone wanted it as well. It expresses the Wu Chi philosophy that my schools are embracing. They have a circle basically and the circle is not a new idea at all but we follow the circle and things circle back around and the circle represents emptiness which you alluded to earlier. One has to be empty in order



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to be filled with anything so emptiness is the key component and character in our system which is the zero for us which has lots of symbolic meaning in the Chinese language as well. The books have explored that a little bit and what that means and how it plays out in the training. It's called The Circle and The Serpent because our logo, my logo is a mythical creature who has, it's a snake with two heads that the heads intertwined to form a circle and so, that has its own story and history behind it too for what we did.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Great. I really, really appreciate you being here, Sifu, and why don't you bring us out on a high note. Any parting advice for anyone listening?

Gary Cecil:

Yeah, I will share with you what I believe that I received as inspiration in one of those moments when you do your meditations and you get these insights and whatever, other weird things happen to people, when they go into these like but one of my, I remember one of those experiences I have that you kind of felt like you were in the presence, for a moment that I felt like in the presence of the Great Masters of the past and I actually felt where I had an experience where I really believe that I was in the Hall of Masters in some other place and, of all people, Jigorō Kanō associated it from him who is the pioneer of Judo, spoke to me. I don't know Jigorō, I mean, I respected his work but he said one word and will pass on that word to everybody else because it's so important. He said, relax. Just relax. One of the great legends of Shaolin masters is there was always this belief that even if you aren't physically present with you master, that there was a form of communication that continued between one another. The masters had the ability to communicate things to their students even at a distance. That's a quantum thing again but those legends exist in Shaolin circles. My teacher claimed that was true for him with his teacher and I would say it's true. Some of the stuff is based on legends but my experience has been there are times I've known things that I just knew them and I felt that came from that connection so it may sound weird but it actually has precedent when you go do the research on some of the legendary relationships that masters have had with their masters so I didn't want to leave it just hanging at some weirdo but there are the stories and again, my teacher also claimed the same with his master. He said he would know that something happened to his master, he would know at that very moment anywhere he was in the world. In psychic connections are kind of part of what we experience and train with and so when I leave with that little word of relax, it comes from one of those same places.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Thank you for listening to episode 94 of whistlekick martial arts radio and thank you to Sifu Gary. Head on over to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com for links to Sifu Gary's website, his organization Facebook page and even a poster with a Kung Fu form he developed and a great accompanying story. It's a lot of fun. If you like to show, be sure you're subscribing or using one of our free apps. They're available on



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