



## Episode 93 – What is a Martial Art | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

Hey everybody, we're back and it's time for another episode of whistlekick martial arts radio. This time it's episode 93. Today, we're going to define what is and is not a martial art. Should be fun. Now, I'm whistlekick's founder but I'm better known as your host, Jeremy Lesniak. Whistlekick, if you don't know, makes the absolute best sparring gear, apparel and accessories for practitioners and fans of traditional martial arts. I'd like to welcome the new listeners and thank everyone that's come back again. If you're not familiar with our products, you can learn more or buy over at [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). Of our past podcast episodes, show notes for all of them and a whole lot more are on another website and that's [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com). From either site, you can sign up for our newsletter and you really should because we offer exclusive content to subscribers, great discounts and it's the only place to find out about upcoming guests for our Monday shows. So, let's jump in, nice short intro for you today.

It's episode 93 and we're going to define what is and thus, what is not, a martial art. Now, this could prove to be a little bit unnerving, might get some hate mail out of this one, probably not hate mail, you guys are always constructive when you offer feedback and honestly, most of that feedback has been private when it's critical and I don't know if that's necessary but, at least, it's appreciated because there's a lot of respect that comes through from that and, in fact, I was just talking with a guest whose episode come out fairly shortly and they were concerned about leaving their phone number on the air for people to get a hold of them and this audience has been absolutely tremendous with the respect and the support for the show, for me, for whistlekick, for the guest and honestly, it was the first time I ever thought about it in that way.

So, I just want to thank everybody before we dig in and it's because of that respect and that support that I feel comfortable going into a topic like this like defining a martial art. I mean, right off the bat, that makes the hair on my neck stand up a little bit because what if what I say offends you? What if the way I draw the line slices what you practice a little bit differently than you would cut it, right? So, I think discussion is good. I'm hoping some discussion comes out of this and please understand that anything that I say today is not coming from a place of disrespect but simply an academic thought process sort of exercise.

So why would we want to define the martial arts? As we see more and more combat disciplines, and I think we can probably agree that martial arts is a subset of a combat discipline, some other are going to qualify and some are not. Now, whistlekick, our pledge mission is to serve the martial arts community, specifically the traditional martial arts community. So, sort of selfishly, we need to know where those lines are and it's not something that we internally ever thought to define before because we sort of taken a we know when we see it approach but if you've been a listener to the show for a while, you know that we've had some people on that have sort of pushed those boundaries and it's forced us to take a step back and look at what really is our target market and rather than just have that discussion internally, we thought hey, let's have that and because you're along for the ride with us, let's make you part of that conversation.



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Now, that's not to say that we're never going to do things that benefit people outside the martial arts community and a great example, when we talk about traditional martial arts, we've been sort of upfront about the MMA, the mixed martial arts, world and how that that is not a market that we're looking to address but honestly, we've seen a lot of MMA fighters, trainers, whoever, people engaged in MMA that really like our shin guards and we're not going to tell them no. We're not going to offer those to those people. We're not going to suggest that may be a better option for someone but we're not going to set out to produce products for that market, right? So, there's some overlap there but that's okay, right? Because we're all trying to do our own thing and hey, let's be real. Whistlekick is a business and we're not going to turn down someone that finds value in our products from purchasing because they're not going to use them in something that we may more traditionally find appropriate for our mission statement so, let's define what a martial art is.

Now, to be honest, this is going to get a little bit nerdy because I come from kind of a...well, we've talked about it on this show. I'm a nerd. I'm a self-proclaimed nerd. Anyone that knows me knows I am a nerd. I double-majored in college and one of those majors was philosophy so I have the context, the academic upbringing to be a nerd and this is how I approach a challenge like this. If we have something we're trying to define, there's a lot of ways that we want to slice it to get to the ultimate outcome. We don't just want to consider a textbook definition. We want to consider the societal definition and things like that. On this show, we've really talked to quite a few people who've come through the martial arts as we defined them up until now.

Anyone that's come on this show, I would say, is a martial artist and they've had lots of different experiences and they've come through different methodologies, different styles, different way of practicing and, in fact, I think you can say there has been very little in common with those methods and the way they practice. Maybe from an 800-foot view but if you really get down into it, the way that a Kung Fu practitioners and the way a Karate practitioner and a Hapkido practitioner operate are different and that's why those styles have different names but there's some common ground there and we've reflected on that through quite a few of our episodes and that common ground is really is that practice has improved them. It's made them better people and so, that's led to a loose but, admittedly, a repeated statement that I've made on the air that martial arts is really about personal development through this idea of combat and so we could say, a martial artist, anything a person can use for personal development within the idea of combat.

Okay, and that definition sort of works but as I was really considering it, I realized it wasn't necessarily as expansive, in some way, and as specific, in other ways, as I really think a martial art should be. What do I do? I'm part of the internet generation. I go to Wikipedia, what do they say? Wikipedia has a broader definition and, bear with me, it gets a little long-winded. Martial arts are codified systems and traditions of combat practices which are practiced for a variety of reasons as self-defense, military and law enforcement applications, competition, physical fitness, mental and spiritual development; as well as entertainment and the preservation of a nation's intangible cultural heritage. That's a lot of words,



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right? Little bit out of breath but you can see quite a bit of overlap. The mental and spiritual development. The mention of the combat aspects but that definition leaves a ton of room. In fact, by throwing the word entertainment in there, we really get pretty broad. Requiring an art, all of those things certainly doesn't make sense so I don't think we can really take too much from that Wikipedia definition so we're kind of back constructing our own.

I think I've said it on this show. I know I've said this to plenty of people off-air. I like to break down the term martial art. We've got two words, whatever they mean independently. The word martial, the easiest way to define it is war-like, combat, I mean, we've talked about that. that makes a lot of sense. Art is where it gets a little bit tougher. Art means the expression or application of human and creative skill in imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting and sculpture, producing works to be appreciated, primarily for their beauty or emotional power. Thus, if we trim off some of the words from the definition of art, we combine those two, we get this sort of compiled definition, could be war-like expression or application of human and creative skill in imagination. That war-like piece is pretty easy. The creative pieces, a bit harder. Maybe a lot harder. Does sparring count as creative? It can be. But it's also very reactive so, you can say, it's not but you can also say that, if you look at the combined efforts of the two people that are sparring, there's something artistic day. You could look at it as a dance or a performance. Capoeira is certainly very artistic. It's beautiful to watch. I've practiced some Capoeira. It's a lot of fun and I think it satisfies all the things that we're looking for. Both are an initial definition and the Wikipedia definition really lack that art piece.

The element of expression and the more that I consider that, it seems pretty important. If you've ever seen someone that did a truly beautiful martial arts form or even just was very skilled in whatever their martial art was. There's beauty there and I think you know it when you see it. I've always liked the definition of an art or an artist, a great artist, whatever their discipline, leaves a piece of their soul in their work and I have absolutely seen martial artists that are expressive at that level. I think we can piece our definition back together, and if you use synonyms that make more sense in this context, a martial art is an expressive combat-themed practice that incorporates personal development. Seems simple and it's pretty broad. If there's a problem with it, it's in the fact that it's simply subjective like a lot of things that we see in the martial arts and the root of a lot of our arguments, right?

Now, what I may consider expressive may not appear so to someone else because a lot of that expression happens internally. Again, I go back to the idea of forms, kata, poomsae, tool, whatever you want to call them, because it's something that is an important piece to me. It's the part of martial arts that I feel the most expressive about. The most passionate. The part that really resonates with me the most. I can do a form in a deeply expressive way but someone that watches it may not recognize it that way. Does that mean it wasn't expressive? No. Now, of course, the martial aspect is much easier to find, easy to see but that art is kind of a rough spot.

First and foremost, martial arts is an art. In the very term, the word art is the noun. Martial is really just an adjective so that tells us that the expressive piece is absolutely key. As I sat and I put together the



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notes for this episode, I really found myself resisting the idea of claiming what was and what was not a martial art. Admittedly, when I first set out in the notes, I thought that we're going to have an easily defined term that we could just run something through and say, this is a martial art, this is not but the deeper I got into it, the more I realize, it's not that simple. Again, subjectivity makes that horrendously difficult to do. If art is personal, then so is the idea of expression. I might look at boxing and say that it's not a martial art but you might look at it and think completely differently and certainly, we consider our example, boxing. The combat piece is there. The personal development piece can be there, though, it's less common than some of the traditional arts like Karate or Taekwondo from Eastern philosophies. When I look at something like Krav Maga, I might dismiss it as a martial art but it certainly satisfies the martial definition and can we really say that someone can't develop personally or express themselves through the practice of Krav Maga? I've actually known people that are living proof of both of those things: the development and the expression pieces.

What may make someone more comfortable, though, is the idea of a traditional martial art and that's really the true focus of this show and of whistlekick: traditional martial art so we're throwing another modifier in the piece. By adding the word 'traditional', it gives us this concept of historical significance and, even though, we can certainly get bogged down in the arguments about what art started when? I think it's easier for people to swallow a dividing line even though we don't put a hard date or a hard definition on what that traditional piece is. Karate, Taekwondo, Kung Fu, historical European arts, Kali, Arnis, there're plenty more, I'm not going to name them all, it's a long list but they generally share some similarities in their practice that makes them recognizable. There's this almost mystic quality. Something that some people see as sort of religious.

Now, boxing, while completely legitimate as a martial art, despite being one of, if not the oldest, martial art; it seems to lack that mystic quality as does MMA, Krav Maga, wrestling and plenty of others. Some of you are going to find plenty of fault with what I've said and that's okay, that's even good. Debate is healthy and I am the first person to admit, if you change my mind. In fact, I'm pretty open to having my mind changed on this because I'm not convinced that I even fully agree with myself. I feel like this definition is as good as I'm going to get right now without having more perspective thrown at it. To revisit that definition: a martial art is an expressive, combat-themed practice that incorporates personal development. A martial artist, very simply, is someone that is engaged in the practice of martial arts and a traditional martial art is something older than something else that martial artists will argue about.

So, what do you think? Do you agree with our definition, my definition? Do you have another way of slicing it?

However, you feel, we want to hear from you. Personally, I want to hear from you. You can get to us on social media. Facebook, twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, all with the username whistlekick or you can leave a comment on our website, [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) and just leave us a comment. Let us know what you think.



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If there's someone you think should hear this episode, help us out, help them out. Go ahead, share it with them. Let's get some great discussion going and it's the only way we're going to come to some definition that makes most people happy. Can we even do that in the martial arts?

Now, if you want to be a guest on this show or maybe you have an idea for a show topic, go ahead, reach out to us. There's a form on the website. Don't forget to subscribe to our newsletter, seeing a step on everything that we are doing. You can learn more about our products at [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com), though our sparring gears are also available on Amazon.

That's all for today so until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!