



Episode 98 – Mr. Tom Bisio | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello, everyone! It's episode 98 of whistlekick martial arts radio, the only place to hear the best stories from the best martial artists, like today's guest, Mr. Tom Bisio. My name is Jeremy Lesniak and I founded whistlekick but I'm also your host for martial arts radio. At whistlekick, we make the world's best sparring gear and some awesome apparel. All for those of you involved in the traditional martial arts. Thank you to the returning listeners and hello and welcome to those of you listening for the first time. If you're new to the show or you're just not familiar with what we make, check out our sparring gear, like our helmets. Very comfortable, with foam that stays soft and protective for a long time. They're a great alternative to the stiffer, lower quality helmets that some other companies make and, if you have children that don't like wearing gear, the foam we use is so flexible that we're seeing quite a few children tolerate our helmets and the rest of our gear when they won't wear other equipment. You can learn more about our gear and the rest of our products at whistlekick.com and don't forget our gear's also available on Amazon. If you want the show notes, you can check those out at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. If you're not on the newsletter list, now's a great time. We offer exclusive content to subscribers and it's the only place to find out about the upcoming guests for the show. We only email a few times a month. We never sell your information and sometimes, we mail out a coupon. Today's episode is with Mr. Tom Bisio, a practitioner and instructor of, as he refers to it, internal martial arts. We spend a lot of time discussing the martial arts overall as well as the internal arts. His background is diverse and so, he's able to tie together a lot of the elements of martial arts, including some we don't typically think about, those around health and healing. It's clear from speaking with him that he's on an educational mission of sorts, making efforts to bring new and revised information to the masses. Let's welcome him to the show. Mister Bisio, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Tom Bisio:

Jeremy, thanks for inviting me on the show. I'm glad to be here. Looking forward to chatting with you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, this will be fun. We have a good time here and, of course, I'm looking forward to getting to know more about you and what you do and I'm sure the listeners are as well so let's do it the way we always do it. We've got to have some context for how you got to where you are. The best way to do that is to go back to how you got started. How did you get started in the martial arts?

Tom Bisio:

I got started when I was 14 at the local YMCA. There was a Korean teacher there who taught various things but he also taught Taekwondo so I took a once a week YMCA 14-week class and I was probably with him for a year or so, a year and a half and then I wanted to do more martial arts things so I went on to study Isshin-Kenpo which is kind of a New Jersey thing at this one school in Summit, New Jersey and



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it's really Isshin-Ryu with some, let's say, Chinese boxing added to it and maybe western boxing as well so I did that until I was 17 and then, got a black belt there, went to college in New York and there was all kinds of martial arts people that I started to meet and, at that time, I got very interested in some of Dan Inosanto's writings about the Filipino Arts and so I was looking for a Filipino teacher but, of course, there was hardly any then and I saw this little thing in the back, I think it's like Kung Fu of the Advanced Arnis Institute, which happened to be the Philippine Consulate on 5th Avenue, so I showed up there and they looked at me like I was out of my mind and said, oh yeah, there's this crazy guy. He shows up on Sundays so I came back on Sunday and we were up on the [00:14:13] on the roof and that's when I met Leo Gaji and I trained with him for probably 15 or more years and that's where I felt like I really began studying maybe martial arts in a serious way. I think before that it wasn't really as serious for me

Jeremy Lesniak:

That almost sounds like the beginning of some comic book origin story. Crazy guy on the roof, you got to come back on Sunday.

Tom Bisio:

Oh, he's a rough looking guy. I was like, I think, 20 or 19. I guess I was 19 and so, there was all these big guys and I'm saying wow, this must be the real thing but once I saw them do as simple as flow drill, I was just wow, that's amazing! I've never seen, I've seen karate but we had never seen anything like that and it was interesting. I mean, in the early days, it's just a few of us training out in Queens 5 or 6 hours at a time kind of on odd schedules and meeting at the park and then, as his organization grew, it changed into different things and while I was teaching Filipino Arts, I had overlapped into Xing Yi Quan and I met, actually at one of Leo's camps, I met Vince Black who I always read about Xing Yi. I've read Robert Smith's books where he's got the pictures of the Masters and something about Wang Shujin's movement in those photos looked very interesting but I never met anybody who did Xing Yi and when I met Vince at this camp where Dan was there and Fred Degerberg from Chicago and at the very end, I met him and I said, oh, so you do Xing Yi and he was like yeah and then basically, spent that night with him eating a piece of chicken with one hand and throwing me around the hotel room with the other hand and explaining to me the principles and so, what interested me was the healing aspect because people would always talk about that but no one I had met really ever did that. They just did the fighting part and I saw him setting bones, doing different kinds of treatments on people so from that moment on, I started doing Xing Yi while I was doing [00:06:38] and that led me into Kajukenbo and Bagua and I also trained in the Philippines with Filemon Cañete after I went there to fight in 1979 and I went back several times to learn his sort of old style [00:07:01] method so, at a certain point, there's all these overlaps and it's not linear in the process like a lot of people's trajectories.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Right and that's, I don't want to say necessarily, common for the guests we had on the show but I would say, at least, the majority of guests we had on the show have trained in more than one style under more than 1 instructor and that overlap, I think is, I don't want to say necessarily, magic there but there is something pretty special once you start adding different things from different people into the way that you view martial arts as a whole.

Tom Bisio:

Oh yes and when you're teaching one thing and studying another thing and that thing creeps into the thing you're teaching and then sort of changes your approach to it, which very much happened with me with internal arts, creeping into the Filipino systems but I think that happens to a lot of people which everything kind of feathers together in its own unique way.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. Now, when you mentioned the piece about people talking about the healing side of arts but not being versed in them there is just something in the way that told me that it was pretty important to you? Just wondering if you could tell us just a little more about that.

Tom Bisio:

Yeah, I really, obviously like a lot of people, I probably started out of wanting to defend yourself and choosing Filipino arts at the time I chose them in New York City in the time it was in the '70s was definitely, you know, you want to learn how to fight but I was always interested in this idea that people knew acupoints and they could, oh, if you got hurt in class, the teacher could fix you but the reality is that's pretty rare, at least back then, maybe it's less rare now. Maybe there's people who are martial artists who, like Chris LaCava, who've been in acupuncture school so they know how to fix stuff but most of my teachers, if they said they knew how, they didn't really know how so, to me, it is important. I think one of the things that I don't like about the martial arts scene in the U.S. is this let's just extract the killing techniques and forget the rest of the culture and the healing part and the health preservation part and the philosophy part which a lot of these traditional arts have. I just saw that with [00:09:30], he's a guy who's a consummate musician. He writes boleros and stuff, plays the guitar and at the same time, he's a great martial artist. I would call him very internal although his method is not internal in a way to get there and then, he's doing faith healing in the Filipino tradition. Not something easy for someone like me to learn if you don't grow up in that tradition but effective. I saw him do things that were pretty impressive like touching points and murmuring a prayer and a person's pain goes away and he did it on me and I wasn't really a believer in the prayer part so it was impressive but that kind of global, I don't want to call it renaissance man thing, but you have all the aspects of the art which is the philosophy, the healing, okay, in his case, music. The health preservation aspect, those things, I think that's why pretty much now I focus on the internal arts more than the arts I did earlier.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Now, for people who may not know what you mean by that, could you tell us about internal arts?

Tom Bisio:

Internal arts is one of those weird terms. It really, technically, means the Chinese internal arts, Xing Yi, Bagua, Tai Chi, maybe Liuhebafa, maybe Tong Bei at this point. Earlier, it included other arts. We could say it includes arts like Aikido but I think it's a misnomer sometimes because lots of arts can be internal so it's much more, I think about, the training method is an internal training method as opposed to an external training method which focuses more on techniques as the method of grasping the art. In the end, I think anybody who's good is probably internal, in other words, they're doing things that are not based solely on their physical wherewithal. They must go to strength but come from something much deeper so, for me, the distinction is the method. The internal method has very specific steps and approaches but you can get to the same level or ability through an external method where you focus on the techniques and physical strength in the beginning but that's just my definition of it because you get 10 internal martial artists together, they'll probably won't agree.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That is also a recurring theme on this show. The fact that we all do, from a bird's eye view anyway, of the exact same thing and we can't agree on any element in any way, right?

Tom Bisio:

Yeah, well, I think some of it's about your internal experience of it, right? And that's very hard to talk about so once you start using words, oh, he's not using the words I use so we're not doing the same thing but in fact maybe you are.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think that's a great way to put it. Comes down to language. I think all of that gives us a wonderful glimpse into you, into your journey and where you're at now and I can only imagine training Filipino Arts in New York in the '70s and what you're exposed to so maybe this is going to come from there or a whole other time but I'd love for you to share with us one of your great stories. Ideally, your best story. Tell us about it.

Tom Bisio:

I don't have a best story. I have lots of weird stories. I don't know best story, Filipino Arts. I didn't really think about a best story there. I remember we would do these, it's a funny story to me, we would do these demos at these Filipino gatherings and street fairs and we'd never get any students from them because Leo's idea was to, oh god, his idea was to build up the organization, get new people in and I started to realize why at this one street fair where I think Chris Sayak was there, I was there, some of the old, Frank Ortega and we're disarming knives into the crowd. One goes off into the crowd. They pull off



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the machetes and sparks are flying, the crowd's right up against the thing and some part of me steps outside myself and goes, we're not going to get one student from this. They'll all think we're crazy and, of course, that's exactly, they're all very impressed, but they all thought we were crazy and we had a number of demos like that, which as the longer I was in the system, the more I realized, we're never going to get any students this way so I don't know. It's a funny story and I saw that happen a lot. Another demo we did at the Playboy club, so I think Dan Inosanto was there and he demonstrated with Leo Gaji and it was just a mess! I mean, there was no preparation so we basically got out there, people getting cut with knives, I got my head split open with a stick, God knows what the crowd made of it! I mean, a lot of them were martial arts guys so they probably liked it. Certainly, Benny 'The Jet' Urquidez came up to me after and was like, that was a great demo, maybe because it looked realistic but it was just a lot of stories like that of funny things that we tried to do. It just didn't quite work out the way we planned which was, some of that was the nature of the way Leo Gaji approached things where there had to be no preparation, real and just make it up on the spot and some of it was probably the rest of us being knuckleheads to some degree.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm still kind of stuck on that first one with the knives flying into the crown

Tom Bisio:

Oh, pieces of metal coming off machetes, who knows where they go? I mean, we're lucky nobody got hit with something.

Jeremy Lesniak:

But there's quite the paradox there. Wasn't that people were enthralled, they wanted to watch close up. I mean, there's a general fascination with combat, violence, however you want to look at it, but yet, nobody wanted to actually participate.

Tom Bisio:

Yeah, God knows, you can't really step outside yourself and say how would it look to me if I saw that and I didn't know what it was because you're involved in it and you love it so you don't really think like that. You think how could they not have liked that? I did a similar demo at my school once to get more students and we did the same thing with the machetes and we did Kajukenbo where we started out by heaving a medicine ball full-force onto people's stomachs which was part of the training and then, full-blast Kajukenbo stuff and I had the Kyokushin guys coming up to me who came to visit saying, great! That was amazing! Nobody signed up, though. I mean, nobody had any interest in the craziness of it and now, I don't really do that kind of crazy anymore so it's all like in my youth kind of.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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And the Kyokushin guys know brutal fights...

Tom Bisio:

Oh, they're tough guys! I saw them spar and I wouldn't want to do what they do so it's kind of funny. I'm like you guys are kind of thinking this is crazy?

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's a lot.

Tom Bisio:

I know but I mean, on the other hand, if I saw what they do and I have seen it, I'd be like I don't want to do that. I mean, I've done that but I don't want to do it anymore or that kind of thing. So, that's one funny story.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's great, those are great and I'm sure you've got a bunch more and we'll get more as we speak and move further along.

Tom Bisio:

Maybe it'll just come out.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's pretend we go back to that 14-week course at the YMCA, that Taekwondo class and you never end up there or maybe, the instructor isn't inspiring. You decide, you know what? This martial arts thing isn't for me. Where do you think you would be in your life now without martial arts?

Tom Bisio:

It's really hard to know because my whole life since then has been martial arts and Chinese medicine which came for me out of the martial arts. I mean, even when I teach it, basically, I'm doing Xing Yi or Bagua while working on somebody so I don't know where I'd be. I can't even imagine it. I mean, my son is 26 and he's starting out in his career so it's interesting...and he's not interested in martial arts so it's interesting to see that path which is, and I've seen other people's paths, but for me, I don't...I'm going to spend more of my life in martial arts than out. I'm going to be 60 next year, I've been doing it since I'm 14 so I can't really imagine a life not doing it which is...I don't know if that really answers the question.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It does. It does and it doesn't and that's okay. I mean, this is the question that...



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Tom Bisio:

And actually, once when I thought when I got into acupuncture more heavily, I learned a lot of the stuff I do from Xing Yi and Bagua training under Vince Black and then, I went to school and I apprenticed in herbs and to go to that next level with it, at one point I thought, yeah, I think I'm just going to do this and not do martial arts but, actually, I realized that all of my medicine really flows from the martial arts and my abilities in medicine flow from it so it's inescapable at this point. I can't really just be an acupuncturist or just be an herbalist because my understanding of the body comes that of the martial arts and we're prescribing exercises from the martial arts for patients as rehabilitation so it's not really possible to separate it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Interesting. Do you see, let me re-ask that, so, certainly, your involvement with the arts and the way you've approached it has shifted over time as your career's come into play and training different things, do you expect that to continue?

Tom Bisio:

Yeah, I think it's already continuing. I mean, I see within the current martial arts scene, which I don't pretend to really completely know but, let's say, within my field, most people who come into internal art are not interested in fighting techniques, per se. That might be a small part for them. I think most people are interested in health. They're interested in meditation and some kind of way of life, philosophy and then, there's a smaller percentage that sees it as actually developing martial skills. Now, it's a martial art so people have to learn some martial skills but it's already changed, the way I teach, because people don't necessarily, not everybody wants to do the fighting and getting thrown on the ground, enjoy locks and getting hit so I've changed a lot. I think my medicine practice which I did for 25 years, I'm not currently in a sabbatical for a while, has influenced that because I get people who are patients and then, they come to the class because they see that all the people who take the class are very healthy but they don't necessarily want to do the combat part or the fighting part so we make them do just enough that helps facilitate the health part so that's a balance I'm working with now by trying to figure out my way through that in the next 20 years or so. I do train currently some of the people I train with in China, one of them is Jao Dao Yuan, who's retired from teaching the secret police, the Delta Force in China and the bodyguards for officials so he's a very fighting-oriented guy in one way and we've been taking students to work with him a little bit and it's mostly technique-oriented and joint-locking and throws and things so, of course, I'm still interested in that but I divide between the people that want to do that and the people that don't want to do that a little bit.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure, sure. Alright, to respond to your question, this is the question that everyone has a really hard time with and that's why we continue we ask the question.



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Tom Bisio:

Yeah, I'd imagine.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Because I have personal belief that the people that find martial arts, find martial arts because they were supposed to whether you call that destiny or whatever, fate. There's just something about martial arts that for the people that find it and stick with it, even for a little while, it's hard to pull it out of them even if they do stop training.

Tom Bisio:

It's true.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And if you were to ask someone, let's say, trained for 10 years and then stopped for 20, if you really got them to consider their training honestly and the impact it has on their life as they move forward, it's pretty deeply rooted even if they're not kicking and punching anymore.

Tom Bisio:

No, and often, when I talk to people like that, it's life circumstances that led them to not train, whatever, they had 3 kids, they had a job that didn't allow them to train regularly so there's still somehow inside themselves, consider themselves martial artists which is interesting. Yeah, I think we choose, we're drawn to things for some reason and if you're drawn to it, you find it in some way or another.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right, I agree. So, let's pull back to reality. No more hypotheticals. These are generally a lot easier for people. How about a tough point in your life, something that you struggled through but you were successful at least in part due to your martial arts experience?

Tom Bisio:

I can't think of a particular tough point. I mean that, I think, in any tough moment, martial arts is always the fallback thing where, as soon as you begin to train, you feel reconnected to something that is nourishes you, that fulfills you, that energizes you so I think, at any point, when I was having difficulty in school or in life, the martial arts is always a constant there. I mean, sometimes I was training a lot. There were periods where I wasn't training as much but it was always the go-to thing to kind of reinvigorate yourself in a positive way so I don't have any particular one point like that.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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It's okay. Honestly, that's probably a very good thing for a lot of people, it's very clear what time in their life is and we've had some rough stories and people that have been with the show for a while know, we've heard some pretty intense answers to that question so, congratulations, you don't have one of those.

Tom Bisio:

Yes, I'm lucky.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So you've mentioned quite a few names of people that you've had an experience with training under and if we were to exclude anyone that you would label as a direct instructor, because this is where I think the better stories come from, who would you say has had the most influence on your martial arts career?

Tom Bisio:

Any who's a direct instructor, wow. I mean...okay...so I've had a couple of older Chinese instructors that I didn't really train with much. In other words, they kind of oversaw a little bit and had their student but I didn't really get to train with them or one of them I trained with for a few times but then he died but I felt that they are very influential in my approach to the internal arts. I think Dan Inosanto, I think I met him once in a seminar with Leo Gaji a couple times but I didn't really train with him was very influential, clearly, because without him, who would've heard about Filipino Martial Arts in the '70s unless you lived in certain parts of California or were in that small world there so he was very influential in a certain period. I do think some of Robert Smith's writings were very influential for me. There's something about, I mean, he's a good writer, something in what he conveyed that made me really seek out or be kind of on the lookout for internal arts that matched up to what I saw in his books. I don't know if I'm answering the question you're asking but exactly...

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's open it up a little bit because I'm kind of reading between the lines and it sounds like there may be somebody that you're ruling out so if I was to ask, who was the most influential person in your martial arts career, who would that be?

Tom Bisio:

I don't think there's one. I'd say, in some ways, I have to say Leo Gaji because, for me like I said, the first thing where I felt like oh, this is the real thing and his level of ability, his ideas about that things had to be realistic, that it had to be counter for counter, that it couldn't be static, the ability to adlib in the moment according to the circumstances, I think that was very influential because then everything you study after that has to somehow match up to that so even though Xing Yi, he probably would not like



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Xing Yi because it's forms, it's fixed forms that you do a lot. I think the result of Xing Yi and Bagua is changing with the changing circumstances, he would have liked and I think it's his influence that made me find teachers that would convey that so I have to say he's the most and probably behind him, it would be Vince Black because that was like a seat change from the Filipino Arts and going into medicine and internal arts so those are probably the two most. I mean, now and in more recent years, there were Wang Shutang in Bagua down in China who I only trained with briefly because he was already fairly crippled but he's impressive nonetheless and taught me a lot of the secrets of his way of training and [00:29:52] who I only oversaw training with some of my now school brothers in Xiangqi, China. Just an impressive, a small, slightly built guy, incredibly powerful, incredibly sensitive, incredibly refined Kung Fu but I never got to train with him but just as I watch him on tape, you just go wow. That's like perfection in Xing Yi that you just go, can I even get close to that? Probably not and that influences you because it sets the bar high.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, without a doubt. I'm sorry.

Tom Bisio:

No, go ahead.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I don't want to cut you off. This is your show, your episode.

Tom Bisio:

No, no. I think I answered that. I don't think there's more to say.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, let's talk about competition. I think I heard you say something about having travelled to the Philippines to fight? There's at least a little bit of competition that happened in your career. Tell us what you've done.

Tom Bisio:

I only was interested in competition as a test so I never did it a lot. With Leo Gaji, we've never done full-contact sparring up until the point in 1979 where they had the first Arnis championships in Cebu City and he, Leo Gaji, had been there for, I think he'd been there 8 months, and we've been training on our own knowing he was going to come back at some point and he sent out a call for we need a couple of guys to participate in this tournament so luckily, I inherited a little bit of money, I had the free time. I think I'm just finishing my senior year of college, I was done with most of my coursework so I thought what the hell, I'll try it so I trained, but I didn't know what the rules would be, and then I flew there and



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fought in this so-called, First National Tournament in Cebu City where they invited eskrimadors from all over the Philippines and I believe, I think I was the only non-Filipino in that tournament so I ended up fighting in the senior instructor division which was supposed to be people with 10 years' experience. I had 3 and I mean, it didn't really matter because when you looked at it, people just junked into different, some people really had 10 years, some people didn't in that division but it was interesting because I didn't know that the rules were going to be. I really had no idea and so that my first contact and say with the [--:32:48] group, with the Cañete clan and a lot of their people so it was an interesting experience to fight there. I ended up tying for the championship in that senior instructor division. The main tie was, I think, the other guy didn't want to fight me when we came down to the final and I was pretty tired and I was like great! Let's be co-champions, good, I like that because the time change and the heat and also, not knowing that there were 20 second rounds so you're going all out for 20 seconds. I didn't actually train correctly for it and I was pretty exhausted by the end of the 3rd fight I had and this was going to the 4th fight so I was happy to say sure, let's be co-champions.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, for anyone who hasn't seen that kind of competition, we've had other Filipino art practitioners on and we talk about the Dog Brothers' Competition and we've linked video on our show notes for that and if anybody hasn't, if you're new to the show, or just want to check out the show notes, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com, but maybe for my benefit as well as everyone else's, what did that competition look like? I mean 20-second rounds, are you wearing equipment?

Tom Bisio:

We had head gear and some kind of a light pad on the knuckles and a sort of smock was lightly padded but by the end, a lot of us have kind of gotten rid of it because it was hot. I think you couldn't hit the legs, as I recall. Three disarms and you lose. Three throws and you lose but you couldn't do a body-to-body throws or they had to be quick throws so it could be a body-to-body throw but it had to be BAM! Throw! If it was like you're struggling like in a judo match, and then you throw, that didn't count and same with the disarming. If you grab the guy's stick and then wrestled and then pulled it lose, the referee would break it before then and also, if you hit somebody and lost your stick, that counts as a disarm so those rules were then adapted by Leo Gaji's organization for a number of years but we allowed hitting the legs and we got slightly stronger headgear because people were using slightly heavier sticks than they were using in the Philippines but that became the rules in his organization for a period of time with the 20-second rounds which is rough because doing road work, which was what I did, doesn't train you for that. It's an aerobic BS so you have to train, sprint training, which I learnt later when we did some tournaments here then, I found if you did the sprint training here, you didn't get tired in the same way but it was interesting from one of the Dog Brothers there, Eric Knaus studied with me when I started to teach Arnis or Filipino Arts, we started to do knife fighting, we originally just took some fencing masks, beat up fencing masks from the Columbia University fencing room, made gloves, I think we tied rubber onto the gloves and we just sparred with knives and then, later when Eric was



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starting to get involved with the Dog Brothers thing, I went out and met him and we did some sparring and that was much more the Dog Brothers style but we had started to do that in our school early on and he had done in California before he founded the Dog Brothers but not just his training, not competitive, really.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure, just personally, I find it fascinating training, sparring at that level of danger. I come from a fairly vanilla background, I guess, in comparison, with karate and taekwondo and foam gear and trying not to hit and all that so it just kind of blows my mind when we get to hear from somebody like that and I'm sure you're coming out of there banged up and bruised.

Tom Bisio:

Yeah, I mean, nobody was...when we did it in the school, nobody was trying to hurt anybody. It's not a competition so you don't have that level of aggression past a certain point even when in Xing Yi, we used to do full-contact sparring, I mean, "full contact" in quotations. We're wearing bag gloves. There was no protection from the glove but nobody's trying to kill anybody, nobody's trying to knock people out. We're just trying to try our techniques and then you can engage in pretty hard sparring without a lot of damage being done.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, you trained with a whole bunch of great people but if you had a chance to train with someone that you haven't yet, who would you want to train with?

Tom Bisio:

I mean, the people I wanted to train with were not alive or I've never met would probably be Ueshiba or his tops, his original group of students in Aikido. I mean, if I was younger and if I had the time like I did in the past, it would've been nice to get that perspective on things because I think they have a very interesting perspective and I think his original group of students, quite on occasion, knew things that are not commonly taught as Aikido today and Aikido and Bagua and Chinese Arts do seem to have a bunch of similarities in their approach to certain things. Certainly, I'd like to have trained with Li Ziming in Bagua, trained with two of his disciples but as he taught differently, different disciples and it's clear when you look at them and their skills are very varied, it would've been nice to see A) the full realm of Li's skills and also, what it is he would have thought would be necessary for me to learn. That's always interesting if you could do it on a hindsight, I guess, on some level, and then, the two other people, Li Kwai Chung who I study, I mean, technically, I'm his disciple but, in fact, I studied very little directly with him. I also studied with his disciples who were then, technically, my school brothers particularly Song Zhiyong but Li was just, I mean, even Song, talks about him in reverential terms. The stuff he saw him do over the years and his abilities and when you watch him move, it's like perfect Xing Yi. I mean, if you



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freeze frame the lines of his body are perfect which is very, very difficult to achieve and I think Song believes he'll never achieve it. I certainly don't believe I'll achieve it in my lifetime but that's your goal and Wang Shutang who I trained with. He had been injured in the head during the Culture Revolution so when I train with him, his legs actually don't work that well which is tough to do Bagua but yet, he was still able to impart to me a lot of the essence of Bagua. A lot of things that people don't teach today in Bagua and could still rock me off the walls of the hotel room even though he couldn't really move his feet that fast so just an impressive guy with a lot of knowledge but I didn't get to learn from when he could really manifest all the skills. That would've been a great thing and then, more recently since a friend of mine studied Kuntao and Silat with Willem de Thouars. I definitely think if I could it would've been nice to study with him particularly the Kuntao, which seems to be parts from Southern China mixed with some internal arts transplanted to Indonesia and Malaysia where blade fighting and weapons fighting were still used in more recent history so they didn't lose the realism of the use of Chinese weapons and the basic training of the Chinese weapons which you don't typically see in mainland China. I'm not saying it doesn't exist but most people are doing it more for performance or perform a form or they're doing simply a Shenfa, body training, aspect and not for the realistic use of the weapons so those are all people I wish I could've studied with, either more or studied with at all.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Those all sound like incredible people and I'm standing here and realizing that I don't have a lot of experience in the Chinese arts or the internal arts and just kind of wishing just the reverence that you have for these people and the way you're speaking about them, I would jump in to train with any of them with both feet, without knowing anything about them because of your, how much you respect them so that's certainly carrying through to me.

Tom Bisio:

Okay, great!

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, that must mean those are great choices.

Tom Bisio:

Well, they're great choices for me, I think, but for other people they might not be the right choice.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, lets steer off a little bit. Let's talk about some things that are a little lighter. How about movies? Are you a martial arts movie fan?

Tom Bisio:



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Yeah, I love martial arts movies. I must have like a hundred of them.

Jeremy Lesniak:

A lot of them? You qualify as a fan, for sure.

Tom Bisio:

I find them like, I think, the formulaic quality is very satisfying. It's like eating a candy and so when you want to not think so much, you just put on a martial arts film and enjoy it for what it is. There's certainly horrible ones and I own a bunch of those and I probably watched them once and never watched them again and then, there's ones you watch every year or so just because you enjoy the formula and I particularly like the ones with Jet Li and Jackie Chan. I guess because they're Chinese arts but some of them are quite well-made. I like the intensity and incredible movement of both of them but I also love Jackie Chan's sense of humor and his whole thing. I saw him once in an interview where he said, you know, Bruce Lee would take out all these guys but I'd hit the guy and have to hold my hand after where he exchanged shin kicks and then he rubs his leg. I just think it's so real in one way and it takes the whole Kung Fu genre and turns it on its head a little bit, makes it funny but I enjoy all kinds of Kung Fu movies or martial arts movies. I like Tony Jaa. I like some of the, I'm spacing on his name. Anyway, I like a bunch of them. The other one I really liked more recently from the Thai kind of point of view is Chocolate. I don't know if you've seen that one.

Jeremy Lesniak:

No.

Tom Bisio:

The girl who's kind of an idiot-savant in martial arts. She's autistic but she can learn martial arts like nobody's business and she goes to collect money for her mother or for some gangsters. They go to beat her up and she just unleashes and she's kind of out of that Tony Jaa fight school kind of camp where they just do incredible stunt in one take which are amazing, just physically amazing. It's also amazing how brutally they get hurt in the filming and how casually they shake it off kind of like the Jackie Chan outtakes at the end which are equally as amazing as the movie, usually. So, yeah, I like all those things.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool. Awesome. How about books?

Tom Bisio:

So, books, I once probably had 300 books when I had a school way back, a full-time school. Everything from the old Oyama books to the Katori Shintō-ryū to Wing Chun to Filipino Arts. A lot of the books I liked when I was younger which were more technique-oriented don't interest me much now so I got rid



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of a lot of them. Probably could get rid of some more. Mostly, now, I'm more interested in the Chinese arts that relate to things I do and I'm more interested in books that gave your insight into either a major figure in martial arts like Ueshiba who much has been written so, in his case, I really like the book by Ellis Amdur, Hidden in Plain Sight, which goes into some of the historical and speculative about the developmental process of Aikido and people Ueshiba may have seen, not even necessarily trained with but seen him do something and may have influenced them so I think that's a really interesting book. Books, of course, I mentioned I think earlier, the books on Xing Yi and Bagua by, forgetting his names, names are going out of my head, Xing Yi Quan: Mind, Body, Boxing where he had pictures of Wang Shu Jin and discussions of meeting in Taiwan with them. I think those are great books. They give you a feel for the people and the martial art and the background and very impressionistic writing about them. The Heart of Karate-do by Egami. Mostly a technique book in Shotokan but very interesting piece in the beginning about his training in Shotokan and developing various kinds of internal prongs and realizing he was training incorrectly and too hard and going back to this softer approach that he felt more like Funakoshi had taught and how that changed his whole outlook on martial arts. I think those kind of books are very inspiring just to see people's struggles with figuring stuff out which is what we're always trying to do with some degree with martial arts. To figure out how to get to the next level. I also really like the Taiki-Ken book which is long out of print by Kenichi Sawai which, again, it's very photographically nice book because it's done in the style of some of the older Japanese books but he gives you a feeling of his movement. A feeling of the movement of his students without really showing you techniques. I think they show a few exercises and things so, and then, you know, but I, I think I mentioned you off of a thing, I started with Bruce's technical books which is techniques and I learned how to fall from them and learned how to do joint locks from them. They had little lesson plans in them. It was great! I mean, so when I got to learning Judo, I already knew most of the ways of falling. Obviously, I didn't know them as well but Judo training refined that but they were great books for their time. I mean, certainly, they're kind of outdated now, maybe but there's still some validity so now I write my own books on Bagua for my students in training manuals. I don't think they're very interesting, for the most part, outside if you do this kind of training because they're more sort of accompaniments to the training process so they're not kind of the inspirational books that I'm talking about.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay.

Tom Bisio:

Yeah, I think that pretty much answers it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, you've had quite the path and obviously, you're not fading away.

Tom Bisio:



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Hopefully not!

Jeremy Lesniak:

And it seems pretty clear as we've spoken that, I mean, I'm almost getting this sense that you're more passionate about martial arts and your involvement in martial arts now than you were, say, 20 years ago. Is that accurate?

Tom Bisio:

Yeah, maybe the passion is different. I mean, I was always passionate but it's so much less about being skillful at fighting and more about the perfection of the technique and the principles of the art and also getting, how do you get other people to learn that, how do you empower them to get that path of internal self-discovery with their own art so that they're not just parroting back moves that you've taught them. Can you do Move 3, A but that it becomes a living, breathing art within them, that's what interests me and it's the same thing I'm trying to do with medicine where you go to school and it's just memorize all those stuff and certainly, like in any martial arts and in Chinese medicine, that's a punitive training. You have to do the foundational work. You have to memorize martial techniques and learn how to do them and learnt he technical details, same in Chinese medicine and then there's the point of putting it all together and that's where you have to transcend those technical aspects into something more than that. I feel like in the last year, I've kind of realized that's what I'm doing because some people have said it to me like one guy in an acupuncture class said, oh, you're freeing my acupuncture. In other words, freeing him from the theory and just looking at the moment of the encounter with the patient and what do I need to do? Does it matter if it's the actual point that the book says or is it where the energy is blocked right now or an actual encounter with physical [00:51:46] bone-setting skills so I think actually, that's what I'm trying to do with the medicine is to get away from the school thing and the technical aspects and get people to understand how to put it together into something that's living and in martial arts, I think the influence of Bagua, the whole idea that there's an encounter, whether it's a physical encounter or not, and there's certain circumstances in the moment and you change with the change in circumstances smoothly and seamlessly or do you not? Which is very hard to do because we tend to come to things from a perspective with a pre-set idea so how do you have all the skills of Bagua or Xing Yi in you but you let go of them in the moment that you're actually using them and how do you teach people to do that? Obviously, first they have to learn the technical skills and go according to the method of learning and follow the rules of the method but then there's a moment where you have to transcend the rules and I think that's true in any art, no matter what martial art you do, or maybe any art at all. Painting, music, so that's what I'm more interested in now. Of course, I'm still learning techniques because I'm going to China to study Zhou Dai Wan and we're learning [00:53:14] techniques so we're also getting insight into the way he thinks about them and the underlying principles of them but, of course, part of it, you're still learning technical things.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Right, I think a lot of times, that technical stuff is just an easier way to explain the internal stuff.

Tom Bisio:

It's true. It's why internal artists have so much trouble teaching their art if they don't want to do it from... because there are some things from each one, they don't want to do it from a technical perspective but then it's incredibly hard to learn because you're just learning some body principles and some training principles and you kind of have, the rest is supposed to unfold naturally but it's very difficult to do that. It's the rare person who can actually manifest that, in my opinion.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, because when you're new at something, I mean, what's the first thing you do? Am I doing this right? And if that's even the right question then it can really throw somebody for a loop

Tom Bisio:

Yeah and Chinese teachers, traditionally, don't answer many questions. In fact, I think the most dangerous moment is when they ask you oh, now, I'll answer questions. Do you have a question? That's when the minefield opens before you because if you ask the wrong question, it can shut the whole thing down. It's really always a little bit like treading in a minefield, training in China. Even with teachers that like you and you like them.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There's a cultural difference.

Tom Bisio:

Yeah, it is! But to that end, I think, I'm kind of moving more towards doing seminar-format teaching because I find that and got a lot of things in the medicine and the martial arts lined up in the coming couple years to try and bring those things together more. Both let people who do medicine, maybe studying martial arts help them and people who do martial arts learn the healing aspect that goes with the martial arts but also, I like the intensive format like when people come in a weekly class, it's very difficult sometimes for them to, you correct something, it kind of gels maybe the last 3 minutes of the class then they don't practice for 2 days for whatever reason. They come back the next week, it's like you're teaching the same thing again. I find, in the intensive, you do a whole weekend, 6 hours a day, people get it and they get it and their body, halfway through the weekend so then, it sticks with them and also, maybe you're self-selecting people that are self-motivated to train on their own because they're only meeting you 4 times a year, 6 times a year, something like that. To that end, we also started doing some online learning seminars in Bagua, courses in Bagua and that's been interesting because I resisted it for a long time thinking you can't really learn that way and, on the one hand, you can't really learn that way but you can learn more than you think that way and then, when people get live



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instruction, it's like they've already, it's like you're teaching someone who's not a beginner already and we've had a couple people come out of that into our instructor training program in Bagua for the foundational level and done quite well.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Interesting.

Tom Bisio:

Well, it also self-selects motivated people who are willing to train on their own and think about things so it's interesting and new thing for me.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool, so when it comes to seminars and those online trainings and whatever, how do people find out more? How can people engage with you and learn from you?

Tom Bisio:

<http://internalartsinternational.com>, spelled out or I think it also goes from New York Internal Arts to the same website. Basically, we're now revamping the site at this moment so we're putting up a schedule of all the seminars and events. I post articles there every month on different things about primarily Internal Arts and Medicine. We have a membership thing, archive, with video and I think probably with 200 articles at this point on different aspects of internal arts that people join but you can also join the mailing list. You don't have to be a member and pay the membership fee so if people on the mailing list send out a monthly newsletter with upcoming events and posts on upcoming events and occasional extra newsletters on maybe a book that's coming out or some special event. Try not to bombard people with too many emails.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You don't spam them.

Tom Bisio:

I try not to.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool. This has all been awesome and I really appreciate it but we always try and go out on a really high note, do you have any advice that you'd like to leave the listeners with?

Tom Bisio:

I think, I'm assuming the listeners are probably martial artists.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Almost exclusively.

Tom Bisio:

So, yeah, I would say, there's those points in your training where you get frustrated and you, whatever you want to call it, feel like you hit a plateau and I remember that very clearly in the Filipino Arts and certainly, in the Internal Arts in different periods. We just feel like you suck basically and you've been training for 20 years and I always think that's often like where sometimes people quit, not when they've been training 20 years but someone that's been training 3, and that's often when you get the next level is when you feel like nothing works or you don't even understand why you're doing it, what you're doing. I think one Chinese writer from the past in Xing Yi said something like when you've entered the maze of doubts, that's when you're going to get better and when everything's going smoothly and you feel like oh, everything looks good, I got the forms I got the kicks, you're actually, he says very clearly, if you practice your whole life like that, you'll achieve nothing but if you actually get to the point where you feel like you're doing everything wrong and when you come out the other side of that, then you're making progress and I think that's something I leave with everybody because it was a lesson for me that that's actually when you go see your teacher or maybe, you need another person who says something to you in that moment where you think I'm doing everything wrong and suddenly, it flips and you realize you've made progress because when you're making progress, actually, things that felt comfortable don't feel comfortable during that changed point.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Thank you for listening to episode 98 of whistlekick martial arts radio and thank you to Mr. Bisio. If you missed the link to Mr. Bisio's school, head on over to the show notes to grab that. Get on his newsletter and learn more about the free resources his organization puts out. If you like the show, please be sure you're subscribing or using one of our free apps. They're available on both iOS and Android. For those of you kind enough to leave us a review, remember we randomly check out the different podcast review sites like iTunes and Stitcher and if we find your review and mention it on the air, be sure to email us for your free pack of whistlekick stuff. Those reviews are a lot more important than you may think. If you know someone that would be a great interview for the show, please fill out the form at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com or if you want to shoot us a message with a suggestion for a Thursday show or some other feedback, there's a place to do that too. you can follow us on social media. We're on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram and our username is always, you probably guessed it, whistlekick. Remember the products you can find at whistlekick.com or on Amazon like the fantastic sparring helmets. If you're a school owner or a team coach, you should check out our wholesale site at wholesale.whistlekick.com. We'll give you guys some exclusive discounts and bulk pricing over there but we'll be back soon so, until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!



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