



Episode 432 – Grandmaster James Keenan | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello everyone! Welcome, this is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 432. Today, I'm joined by my guest, Grandmaster James Keenan. I'm Jeremy Lesniak, I'm your host on this show. I'm the founder of whistlekick and I'm just a guy who really loves martial arts so I founded whistlekick and that's why we do this show and, on top of this show, we do a lot of other things. Head to whistlekick.com, you'll see all the things we do including the products that we make and if you check out the store, you make a purchase, use the code `PODCAST15`, that's going to get you 15% off everything, the whole shebang from protective equipment, to uniforms to hats, sweatshirts, tees, sweatpants, shoes. There's a lot in there. you should go and check it out. We're adding stuff all the time too. now, if you want more information on this show, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com is the place to go and that's where you'll find transcripts and links to play every single episode we've ever done, videos and just a bunch that's going to give you context into our guests and our topics, help you understand more about what's going on, where they've come from and maybe even reach out to some of them. As a passionate martial artist, I enjoy talking to other passionate martial artist that's kind of the hallmark of this show and that's what we're bringing you today. Stories of a man who's been training for a very long time, who's travelled all around the world and influenced and have been influenced by some pretty amazing people. We've had a lot of great storytellers on the show over the years and today's guest ranks up there with the absolute best so here is my conversation with Grandmaster Keenan.

James Keenan:



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Hi Jeremy, how are you?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm doing great, thank you. Yourself?

James Keenan:

Very well. I'm very well. I'm looking at your picture in zoom and the picture that you have up, you're sitting in a car and I'm just suddenly getting this Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee vibe.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Such a good show, isn't it? We've done a couple episodes of what I toyed with calling Martial Artists in Cars Talking About Martial Arts, coupled with my brother where we were just driving somewhere and I said, half the time we're talking about martial arts anyway so let me just record it and I have a GoPro that I put on a dash mount and just video us talking and it's funny because those episodes are just so, to me, they're so simple but we really enjoyed them because there's a different quality and interaction. I don't know if you're a fan of Jerry Seinfeld show there.

James Keenan:

Oh, I've watched all of it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's so fantastic and I think the current season, I don't know if you saw, maybe it was the last season, he went through all of the knockoffs, all the shows that are using roughly the same title which I found hysterical.

James Keenan:

Well, everybody wants to copy a good idea.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yes, yes, they do.

James Keenan:

The nice thing about it is there's a certain level of informality where, oh, we're just having a chat. This isn't like an interview. We're just having a chat.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And that's the type of format that we try to do with martial arts radio when I started over 4 years ago.



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James Keenan:

4 years? That's really good, congratulations.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Thank you. Thank you. You're going to be episode 432.

James Keenan:

432. That's actually an excellent episode number. I like that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Is it?

James Keenan:

Yes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Are you a numerologist?

James Keenan:

Every now and then, I'll look at lucky numbers and a 9 is a good number for me so 32 and 4, you add those 3 numbers, you get 9 so it's bound to be good.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm stoked for that. One of the things I'm seeing, I'm seeing the photos and I'll go through those later but one of the things that's important, I've got to know what to call you. What title do you go by?

James Keenan:

Well, Jim.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And if we were training?

James Keenan:

The titles that people use, they vary depending on the formality of the circumstances. If you were talking about me as sort of what my position in Dotokushin-Kai is, you would refer to me as, head instructor or grandmaster or if we were on the mat and we were in the sort of a Japanese cultural setting, you would just call me sensei and if we were working on Chinese arts and we were in some kind



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of formal setting, you might refer to me as Shifu or something like that but 99% of the time, I just want people to call me Jim. I don't want anything to stand between me and them.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's interesting because this aspect of the show, while it's so small and it is certainly not trivial because it leads to a lot of conversations about, or if you're familiar with Rory Miller, but he's written a number of books, *Meditation on Violence*, I believe is his most famous one and he outright forbade me to call him anything other than Rory Miller. He said no, no, it's not what we're going to do. Sometimes, I'll default back to titles like Mr. or Mrs. With the guest on the show because one of the things is you end up with these contrarians in the martial arts community who, if they started listening to an episode and they hear me introduce you as Jim, they would turn it off and I think that's so silly but at the same time, I want them to be able to hear the conversation so I bend a little bit.

James Keenan:

I think it's alright to be forthright and say it right out that alright, we're having a conversation with Grandmaster James Keenan of Dotokushin-Kai. In our conversation you'll hear me refer to him as Jim, that's his personal preference.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah and quite often, that's what we do because when 2 people are talking, there's really no need to refer to anyone. If I'm talking to someone, you know I'm talking to you. There's nobody else here and vice versa.

James Keenan:

An example of this kind of titles getting in the way, my mother was a principal of an elementary school not far from where we lived and when my little sisters got big enough, they actually went to the school and while they're at school, they had to call their mother Mrs. Keenan. Can you imagine that? I was away by that time, I was in the military but when they told me, when my sisters told me that I was just sort of facepalmed and I was like what?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I had friends that had to deal with that. I grew up in a small area in Maine and quite a few of my friends had parents that worked in the school system in some capacity. I had a friend, Kelly, and her mother is the gym teacher and they would always try to make sure that kids weren't in the same classes as their parents but if they had reason to have conversation with them publicly, it wasn't mom or dad. It was Mr. and Mrs. Whatever and it was weird.

James Keenan:



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There was a comedian named Fred Stoller and he actually made a joke about this in one of his stand-up routines. He was talking about the close relationship he had with his mother and he would often talk to her and say Mrs. Stoller, he can do that joke better than I can.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I grew up next door to a pre-school and grew up with the 2 children that were born into that family and the older child, Katie, who was a couple years younger than I was, she grew up around all these children calling her mother, Barbara, and she was probably 5 before, when she was very young, she would refer to her mother as Mom but then, eventually, she became Barbara and then, eventually, she switched back to Mom when she understood the difference but everyone else was calling her Barbara, why would she call her anything else? I always found that really interesting.

James Keenan:

Yeah, I get it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

How about this? How about we completely sidestep me introducing you and we just kind of run with what we've been doing because I'll be honest, it's been good conversation. It seems like a shame to cut it off and start "formally".

James Keenan:

Yeah, whatever you like. I'm at your service.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm going to record an intro and an outro later and at this point, the listeners know who you are and...go ahead. I'm sorry I cut you off.

James Keenan:

When I was talking with Leslie on the phone yesterday, she told me she was about to take off for her trip to Japan and she said she would probably be listening to this on the plane so I promised her, I would be as interesting as I could be for her.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm sure she appreciates that. I certainly do. I'm sure everyone else does too and we've done a few episodes like this where we just start talking and you know? The audio quality is good. I don't want to start over because we've already done the hard part which is to start building some rapport and I noticed when we hit that reset button, it hits the reset button on that. We kind of got to start over so I'm going to launch into this "first question".



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James Keenan:

Go right ahead.

Jeremy Lesniak:

About how did you get started in the martial arts?

James Keenan:

How much time do we have? This is a long story.

Jeremy Lesniak:

All the time you want!

James Keenan:

When I was growing up, I was small and I was also a late bloomer so I was small up through the beginning of high school. I was, at 14 years old, I was 5 feet tall and 98 pounds and I was very shrimpy. I had been, not just bullied, but abused by older children, older boys and so, I had a very tough childhood to the point where, sometimes, I would come home from school and I would just get behind the couch in the living room and not come out and my parents, this was different, we're talking about the 1950s, and so, there wasn't the same kind of awareness of things that we have today and so, all these things were happening to me and my parents were blissfully unaware even when things would come up where I ran away from school in the middle of the day out of fear and then, I got in trouble for running away from school and I would say to my mother, they're going to beat me up at lunchtime, I can't be there and they're not going to beat you up, go back to school. Anyway, so, by the time I was 14, my father really became conscious that stuff was happening to me all the time and he was a veteran of the 2nd world war and he had seen enough combat that he, one of the things that combat veterans get is a desire, not to foster more combat. You get tired of combat. Combat is a bad thing. You don't want to be in combat. War is not glorious, wonderful and good. It's awful and horrible. So, my father is in that kind of headspace and he didn't want to teach his son to be violent and I can remember him giving me pep talks about how much better a person I was than the people who were doing things to me, on and on, like that and I know, even as a kid, there's a part of me that's going okay, Dad, that's great but this is not helping me so my father, at one point, was teaching at the University of Pittsburgh. He was teaching English and, lo and behold, there was somebody in this class who practiced Karate. Now, this is really kind of exceptional back in the day because martial arts, if you talked about martial arts in the United States in those days, you were talking about Judo and so, to meet somebody who practiced Karate was a little unusual and so, my father got into a conversation with this young man and heard lots of things that he liked particularly the idea about this wasn't just about violence, it was about personal development and spiritual things and blah, blah and so, my father decided that maybe this was the thing for me and so, he actually introduced me to martial arts and I started out with Japanese Karate because, a lot of the



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time in the United States at that time, if you were talking about Karate, you were talking about Japanese Karate and once I discovered this and realized that this was a path to personal power for me, I became an absolute martial arts maniac because I was going from a position of extreme weakness and all I wanted was to be so powerful that nobody could ever do anything to me again and that's where I started out. By the time I was, I don't know, I think about 17 or 18, I was going to 5 different schools simultaneously and none of the schools knew I was going to the others because they all would've been wait, you're in our style, don't go to that style and it was a typical day for me was at least 10 hours practice and I did that for the first 12 years that I was practicing because until I got to the point where I was satisfied with my strength and ability, I didn't start to taper off because what happened at the beginning, I wanted to be strong and so, my practice emphasized everything that involved strength, breaking things. When I look back at the things that I did at that time, I'm sort of like, how in the world did you survive doing all these stuff because I used to do crazy things to develop my power and control. I would set up devices so that I could approximate what it would be like to crush them and head on the floor. It's like WHAT?! What happened, of course, is that once I started to develop a certain level of strength, I realized I really didn't want to hurt people. That that wasn't the thing for my life. I didn't want to hurt people so I started ratcheting it back so I got this point where, okay, instead of just hurting them, I will give them back everything they wanted to give me +1, just a little bit revenge thrown in there and after a while, I got to the point where I could do this consistently and I was like you know, I really don't want to do that either so then, I got to the point where okay, I'll hurt them as little as I can and then, once it got to that point, then I was like, I don't really want to hurt them if there's no absolute requirement to hurt anybody and then I developed to the point where, okay, I'm going to try to protect the person who is attacking me at the same time that I'm going to try and deny the consequences of what they're attempting to do and so, it took me a better part of the decade to develop to that and I was very happy and all of my, I've been practicing and studying now for 55 years and my life experience, because of my first career was in security and anti-terrorism, and you can see why we get drawn into a career like that, because my feeling of wanting to prevent myself from being harmed then started to extend to I want to protect other. I don't want to anybody else to get hurt if I can help it and so, I got into a field where I could be the sheep done that stood between the sheep and the wolves and wow, that was just a long rambling thing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

No, it's perfect.

James Keenan:

You get to a certain age and you start to think all your stories are just so interesting and the audience is sitting there yawning.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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No, no, the audience is used to this so you don't know what a number, I don't know how often I express this publicly on the show but the original impetus for the format of this show was that I was tired of going to events, testings, summer camps, things like that and hanging out with the senior ranks and they would get a couple beers in them or a couple shots of sake and they would start telling these stories that they would refuse to tell other times because it seemed appropriate in that moment but it didn't seem appropriate to them after class or during class or in a more, let's say, public and professional space and I said, everything that we're going to do with this show is to get people to tell these stories because of all the aspects of martial arts that we have that are chronicled, these are the ones that aren't and so, that's my little mission with this show is to make sure that these stories that we've got a ton of people listening, not immediately right now because we're not live, we have a ton of people listening to this show, to that story you just told and I bet you every single one of them kind of shook their head when you said rambling and people yawning because this is why they tune in.

James Keenan:

Well, hi to all of you people out there. I'm glad you're listening.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Me too, me too. Otherwise, we're a couple of crazy people that's just talking over microphones with each other and putting it out there and nobody listens. I think that's kind of nice.

James Keenan:

So, when I started out, I was doing Shotokan, Shōrin-ryū, Isshin-Ryu, Chung Do Kwan and Judo, Kodokan Judo and by the time I got in the military in 1970, I thought that I was the hottest thing since sliced bread. I was great! I was tremendous and so, I got sent to the defense line institute in Monterey, California to learn Chinese and not long after the classes started, they had a party for the students and the teachers so, naturally at the party with all the Chinese teachers, I was talking about my favorite subject because in those days, you couldn't talk to me unless you wanted to talk about martial arts. Hi, how are you? Fine. Look at my punch and so, I'm there and I'm talking about rawr, Karate, I'm so good and one of the teachers was an elderly lady. Her name was Chun Mei Li and the other Chinese teachers, while they were listening to me, were saying well, we, Chinese, we have our martial arts too. Very laid back like that and so, I didn't realize that they had suckered me into doing a demonstration with Chun Mei Li and so, what the demonstration, from my point of view, was going to be was I was going to do a straight punch as fast and as hard as I could at Chun Mei Li's face and stop it an inch away. Back in those days, when you practice those arts, you practice control to the maximum degree so that you could stop your technique any place and never hit unless you really meant to hit and I expected to do this punch and have her be all startled and all the Chinese people will be going oh, oh my god, you're so great! Alright, so, I remember starting to do the punch and the next thing I knew, I was on my stomach on the floor and she was kind of breaking y wrist, elbow and shoulder, more or less in that order. What I didn't



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know was she was 65 and she'd been practicing martial arts since she was 5 and she was the teacher of all the other teachers there so they got a big kick out of that. I didn't realize until I've seen enough Kung Fu movies later that I had been acting exactly like the Japanese bad guy in the Kung Fu movies and she had given me my Jet Li comeuppance so because the thrust of all my training, and this continues to this day is to develop high skill rather than just be a devotee of one particular style. I want to develop global high skill in martial arts and so, I recognized that her skill was something I've never seen before in my life so I just started following her around like a little dog at her heels, begging her, teach me, teach me, teach me, teach me and she would not. One of the things that we don't realize now, if you're growing up in the martial arts world of today, is that back in the '70s, it was not particularly common for Chinese martial arts teachers to accept western students. I think there was, I may be wrong about this and somebody should correct me and I would be happy to be corrected, I think it was Ar-Kwai Wong in Los Angeles who was one of the first to accept western students and teach them publicly and my understanding is he got a lot of flak over that but anyway, I followed her around like this and I bought a book. I asked one of the Chinese teachers, what did she do? What martial art did she use? And the fact of the matter was Chun Mei Li knew a lot of different art but this person told me oh, she used Tai Chi motion. Oh, I never heard of that before, I never heard of that. So, I went looking for stuff. No internet. I had to go to bookstores and I found a book, it's called Bruce Tegner's Complete Book of Kung Fu and Tai Chi. Chris, I didn't know how to say it. I thought it was Tai Chi and so I got this book and I'm looking at the pictures. I'm thinking oh, this is just like the forms that I knew where it went abruptly from one thing to the next and so, I tried to start learning Tai Chi from this book and after I learned a few movements, I went to her office and I said look, I really, really want to learn. I learned from this book. Here, watch me do this. It's Tai Chi and I started to do it and I'm going basically, ha! Ha! Ha! And she's looking at me like I just grew two heads and she just sort of patted her hand towards me and said no, Mr. Keenan, like this and she stood up and she started to do the beginning of a Yang style Tai Chi form. Now, of course, I didn't know this happening at that time but she started doing it. I had never seen movement like this. I had never seen this. this was revolutionary to me and it was so amazing. I felt like I couldn't even see her movement. I couldn't tell what she was doing but she still wouldn't teach me. I was relentless and finally, one of the teachers told me that every day at lunch time, she led all the teachers in Tai Chi practice in one of the big empty classrooms and I remember this woman, her last name was Fong, and she told me that Mrs. Chun was going to allow me to come into that room while they practice and Mrs. Fong took me in the room. She stood me in a back corner and she said, don't talk to anybody, try and do what we do and so, I'm standing in the back and I'm watching them and I can't really tell what I'm doing and I'm just going eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, just jerking around but once I was there, I didn't go away and I was terrible then one day, I showed up when there was supposed to be class and there was no class. Nobody was there. As a matter of fact, the whole school building was empty. I'm looking around, where is everybody? I bumped into one of the men teachers who was still there and I said where is everybody? He told me that her father had just died and they were all going out to the funeral and so, I begged him, please just wait for a second then I ran back to my barracks room and I had a suit and I put it on and we went to the funeral. I was the only non-Chinese person at the funeral and my Chinese was not very good



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at the time and so, he stood me next to him and he said just do everything I do and I did and she came from a Chinese Christian family so when they sang Christian hymns in Chinese, I was basically just [00:28:30] trying to pretend like I was singing and when they stood, I stood and when they sat, I sat and then, at the end, everybody filed up and did 3 ceremonial bows to the minister. One by one each person and then 3 ceremonial bows to the coffin where her father lay and then, 3 ceremonial bows to her standing by her mother and so, I just followed the person and I did everything they did and when I go over to her and I did the 3 bows, she took my hand. She had heavy veils on but I could see through her veils, she had tears on her cheeks and she just took my hand in both of her hands and just said thank you, Mr. Keenan. What's interesting about this whole thing is not just that I sort of did this cultural experience. Her father was Hollington Tong. Look him up. He was a bigwig in the Nationalist Chinese government and was very well-known in the United States. He had been an ambassador. He was, if you look Hollington, that's spelled pretty much the way it sounds and Tong, T-O-N-G. She was Hollington Tong's daughter and I was the only non-Chinese person at Hollington Tong's funeral but, to go on from there, I thought it was kind of a shame what, after I learned at the time, I had no idea who Hollington Tong was and later on, after I learned, I thought it was a shame that nobody from the US Government had done everything but that was the point where my relationship with her changed and I think this was, again, this was so long ago, my old brain is not remembering everything right. I think this is early '71, 1971.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yup, that's what I've seen.

James Keenan:

After that, it was like I had stepped through a door and was now, no longer on the outside. I was on the inside and from there on, she became kind of like a mother to me and instead of just going to this lunchtime class, I used to go to her house. She had 2 sons and her sons, apparently, weren't interested in martial arts at all and her family name, what's Romanized there is Tong, in Chinese, it was Dong and she told me that she learned Baguazhang, she said from her uncle. The founder of Baguazhang, his last name was Dong and so, I'm guessing they came from the same clan even if they weren't directly related and Dong Haichuan, I don't think he was alive. She was born in the, I think, either the late 1800s or the early 1900s so there was a heyday for Bagua in China in the 1930s and so, she would've been part of that heyday prior to the revolution but she was so amazing. She could throw coins, multiple coins, by holding them between her fingers and flicking them like a ninja. It was astounding and because she came from an aristocratic family, one of the things that happen with these families is there'll be big, a big clan and there's a lot of different terms of address depending on where you are if you're talking to someone senior to you or junior to you and the way they can keep track of that, particularly in the male line, is they'll be a big family poem and boys from certain generation will have a particular character from their poem in their name so if they're talking to somebody else, the other person will recognize, the other person talking to them will recognize with the poem and so they know if this person is their



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elder or their junior so I had a Chinese name up to that point which literally translated to Keenan who can do one thing. Not the best. She gave me a new Chinese name and the wonder and brilliance for me of it is she gave me the same character from her family poem as her sons and I was super touched, super touched so, anyway, so that's a long story about that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's powerful and if I can ask you a question.

James Keenan:

Oh yeah, sure, go.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's clear that in that moment where you're demonstrating your skill, you're throwing this punch and meaning to impress everyone around you and you wind up on the floor which, ironically, or maybe not ironically, the most gifted Tai Chi instructor that I've been able to work with, did roughly the same thing. I knew something was coming. I knew I wasn't going demonstrating my prowess but the speed with which I was laid out and gently, I might add, was utterly phenomenal and I made him demonstrate it several more times because there were plenty of people around because I couldn't, it's so fast, I couldn't pick up on anything. It's easy to make the physical concession in that moment. Hey, there is something here that I want to learn. There's more than what I've been taught et cetera but up until that point, you had formed this new identity and taken a lot of strength back from your martial arts practice.

James Keenan:

That's a fact.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Did that moment, did that unsettling of what you've learned, did that change your identity, that new understanding of who you were?

James Keenan:

That's really an interesting question and I don't think that anybody has ever asked me that for as many times as I've told that story. No. I would have to say no and I think, this is my first reaction, I think that the reason it did not was that I did not view her, or the Chinese, as being in the position of being potential oppressors of me whereas, my initial Karate training had started and developed as a reaction against those who had hurt me before. My approach here was really, this is a new world. I've already sort of conquered the other world so I'm not worried about that and I'm not worried about this elderly lady suddenly bullying me. For me, this was like a new kind of wonderland and rather than being put off by it, I was attracted to it. The thing is, if you ever get to the point and I have to say and this is, it used to



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distress me a lot more but now it's just a sort of nagging disappointment that sits in the back of my mind all the time, is that I meet lots of martial artists. I meet them and they're very nice people and some of them had trained for decades but at a certain point, they decided they knew it. They had arrived and they stopped. I can't tell you the number of people that I've met who trained 20 years but in fact, they trained 1 year and then, repeated that for 19 more because they stopped after their first year because they thought okay, I've got it now or they stopped when they reached shodan, black belt, when they reached black belt, they stopped because now, they were black belt. They're all I know I am this and then, they just walk around holding their belt doing hut-hut and expect everybody to bow and their practice died and it's a very important thing to me to keep a live practice all the time and that's what my practice was at the time that I met Chun Mei Li. It was nowhere near as developed in scope or in depth as it came and continues to become. I was sort of on the right track of being open. One of the things that I tell people who I train now is the less ego you have in your practice, the better your practice is going to be and the higher your skill is going to be, the more selfless you can be in your practice, the higher your skill is going to end up being and I think that by the time I met her, I had started to enter that space. I wasn't very far in. There's a Chinese saying don't be afraid to go slow, just be afraid to standstill. I was taking these baby steps very slowly and I was getting into that headspace where I was developing more and more an egoless practice and a more selfless practice and when I say at that point that I'm starting to develop an egoless, selfless practice, what I mean is I was all ego and I was all self. I was nowhere near it. I was nowhere near it and that allowed me to accept the new horizon in a way that didn't affect me badly at all. One of the things that happened as part of this whole development process, I was happy to test my skills against other people but I always tested those skills in sort of, not a competition format, but in a challenged fight format where it's like okay, if you want to test your skill, I'm happy to engage with you but it's going to be a no holds barred fight and I'm going to hurt you and everybody who was willing to do that, I was happy to work with them on that and I continued on that path until, well, actually I'm not off that path, I still do it; but up until I went to California in 1975, after I got out of the service which was 1974, I went back to Pittsburgh, my hometown, and stayed there for a while then went to California and that's where I first started teaching Bagua publicly. I remember telling the Karate students in Pittsburgh that I knew a system that was so good that it made everything else seem like nothing and I would be happy to teach it to them if they wanted to learn it but their heads were really in a sort of Karate space and they didn't want to learn. I had only been training since 1970 so it's pretty nervy of me to think in 1975 that I could start teaching this but I went to California and started to teach openly in Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz, that's where I was and there was quite a bit of martial arts there at the time and people did come to challenge me and I always accepted their challenges and they always left either wanting to become my student or upset and there was an Aikido club up at UC Santa Cruz at the time and there was also a Shotokan club over there and the Shotokan guys kept beating the Aikido guys up and the Aikido guys were all upset about that because they had a high opinion of their Aikido and Aikido is supposed to be great yet how can the Shotokan people knock them around so somebody had seen me practicing and one of the things about Bagua is that people tend to see in it what their own background is so that somebody comes with a Karate background, they think oh, that



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was so much like Karate or if they come from an Aikido background, Jiu Jitsu background, they're like oh, Bagua really is very Aikido-ish and Jiu Jitsu-ish and so on or if they come from a Tai Chi background, they'd be like oh Bagua is really kind of Tai Chi, isn't it? so, anyway, these Aikido guys saw me and they heard I was doing all these challenge fights and I was consistently coming out on top so they came down and introduced themselves and asked that I show them and so, I showed them just, as anybody nowadays could, but back then it was sort of magical. I showed them if you're an Aikido practitioner and you have to train somebody who's doing it with this kind of style, here's what to do and they were oh wow! This is so amazing! One of them turned out to be a guy who wrote for various martial arts magazines and so, they wanted to do an article about Bagua for Black Belt magazine and so, I was like okay, it's fine with me. So, this guy came and interviewed me and they want to take some photographs and I said okay and then, they said, well this is Black Belt magazine, they want you to wear Karate gi for the photos and I'm like uh, you know this is a Chinese art, right? This is not Karate. Well, yeah, but, you know. So, I'm like alright, okay. I'll do it. So, they took the pictures and they wrote this article and then before publication, they sent me the article. They said if there's anything incorrect here, will you please just pencil it in and then, send it back to us before we publish the article. They had spelled Bagua wrong everywhere. Now, in the [00:45:20] romanization, Bagua is spelled P-A-K-U-A but it's pronounced Ba-gua. It's a quirk of the romanization. They had spelled it P-A-Q-U-A as if it was pak-qua which I've heard as a common mispronunciation when people who don't actually know how to say the name correctly, Bagua. So, I dutifully went through every place they had P-A-Q-U-A. I crossed out the Q, put a K, cross out the Q, put a K, sent it back to them and sure enough, it's published in Black Belt magazine, Paqua, P-A-Q-U-A and so, this was, I don't know, the September issue of Black Belt 1977, I think. If it's not September, it's May. I don't really remember but it's one of the other. What I do remember is on the cover there is some Korean martial artist who is kicking somebody in the face, I think, so you can look that up. I think all of the old Black Belt magazines are on Google now so you can actually look and the cover, it turned out to be where one of those articles where every other sentence is completely wrong. I remember somebody brought me the book in the internal arts once and they said could you look at this book for me and tell me the good things in it and so, I looked at it and so, the first half of this sentence is okay, second half, forget that. This whole book was like that. This article was like that and on the cover, remember the origin of all this was because I came to people's attention for all the challenge fights, right? So, on the cover, it says the martial art that rarely gets tested. What?! The whole point was it was being tested all the time so, if you're curious and you have a lot of spare time, I invite you to look that up on Google and the funniest thing about it was it was the '70s, I had long hair, okay? A woman who came and took some lessons from me was also in hairdressing school and she had just learned how to give a permanent so she said, hey, for practice, could I give you a permanent? I was like, alright, alright because the thing with hair, you got a bad haircut, it'll grow back or you can cut it off, start over again. So, she gave me a perm and so, all the pictures in this article, I look like a Q-Tip. I got this big, poufy hairdo, very '70s, very '70s. After my brother saw this, he wrote me a letter and said, I take back every good thing I ever said about you since 1954 but it's kind of hilarious but the thing is I was the first non-



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Asian of whoever got featured in a national martial arts magazine for Bagua so that was something and let's see, I'm just rambling again.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And this is the hallmark of the show, this is what we do.

James Keenan:

I have not given you the chance to say anything.

Jeremy Lesniak:

People don't want to hear about me. 432 episodes in, they've heard a lot from me. They're excited to hear from other people at this point.

James Keenan:

They're already tired of you, okay.

Jeremy Lesniak:

They're tired of me by episode 50.

James Keenan:

I'll tell you, by the end of this episode, they'll be tired of me too.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's how you know it's the right amount. When you're teaching a class, you want to, you don't want to end class when they're still hungry to learn more. You want to ride it out to the bitter end so they leave and they're bruised and bloody.

James Keenan:

Get me out of here, get me out of here. So, you mentioned bruised and bloody, in the old days, say I started in 1965 and back in those days, everybody was into pain. You were expected to get injured. You were expected to go to class and come out damaged every time and part of the training was that you were supposed to suck it up and never show that you had been hurt. Keep this cool demeanor no matter what even if your insides were falling out. I got most of the lifelong injuries that I ever received, I got most of those in the first few years of my training and somehow, and just to give you an idea, jaw dislocated, intercostal cartilage, a ribcage kicked out on both sides, my left leg dislocated from the socket, my left arm, forearm, broken and these are just not counting all the lumps and bruises and at that time, I always had the feeling in the back of my head that someday I would teach this. Someday I would be teaching martial art and so, I really paid attention to everybody who ever taught me. I've had a



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lot of teachers over 55 years and I would observe okay, this is good. Remember to follow that example. This is bad, don't do that and over the years, I came up with sort of a code, a list of rules for teachers and everybody who's ever trained with me and become a teacher follows these rules and the first rule and all these rules I consider to be absolutely unbreakable. First rule is it's the duty of the teacher to protect the student whole the student is learning. That seems logical, don't it?

Jeremy Lesniak:

It does.

James Keenan:

I hear about I'm getting beat up outside so I'm going to learn how to defend myself so I go to a school and now, I'm going to pay money and get beat up? It was cheaper for me just to stay out on the street and get beat up than to come into the school and get beat up. Now, this is not to say that students don't need to learn how to deal with hardship don't need to learn how to test their own boundaries and learn that they're actually capable of doing much more than they think but I had teachers who would, when they would go around and they'd be correcting, correcting your posture, correcting your leg or your arm. They didn't just tell you. They had a stick and they hit you. If your leg was out of place, they whack you on the leg. No. No. Sorry and some of these practices were inherited from some Asian practices honestly. Those things happened in China, things happen in Japan, in Okinawa. There's a lot of historical revisionism now. I've noticed people changing histories so that whitewash bad things. I've been around long enough that, like I was there, I saw it. So that when somebody tells me now oh, this is how it was then. No. I'm glad you think that but I don't bother correcting most people first off because so many of the people who I knew are dead and so, what does it matter anymore? Otherwise, I would go directly to that person and help straighten them out but how did I get off on that? I don't know how we got off on that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We were wandering and that's okay.

James Keenan:

We're just wandering.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's take a hard left now that we get the chance down.

James Keenan:

So, I went to Israel. I got a job there as a head of security and insulation and I started, I've been teaching continually for 50 years now and just this Spring, we had a big celebration of my 50th anniversary and so,



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I went to Israel and I started teaching there immediately and I found a local judo school that was run by a gentleman named Nathan Einziger and he, I think he called his school The Budokan or something like that. It was a small school but it was nice and so, I said that I wanted to teach and that he could have all the money. I just wanted to teach and that's why I started teaching there. The Israelis, this was 1980, Israelis at the time and I think they're probably still this way, they're all from Missouri. Other words, you have to show them. You can't just tell them stuff so if you walked in and said oh, hi, I have X-degree black belt, they'll say oh, that's really nice. Let's fight. Just like that. They want to see. So, the first 2 years I was in Israel, we talked about challenge fights, I was fighting all the time and I remember there was one man, he became my student. He was a leader of a street gang. His street name in Hebrew was Shed which means demon. He had already been kicked out of some martial arts schools for being too violent so he showed up and he wanted to fight me and I'm like okay. If you want to fight, I sort of laid out what was going to happen and I said, but I can tell you right now, my skill is too high for you. You don't stand any chance. I'm master of this and he said, oh, that's okay. I know what it feels like to get beat up by a master. This was very Israeli so 3 minutes later, oh, can I be your student? Could I be your student? And I let him and it turned out to be a really good thing for him because he dropped out the gang, he changed his life, he ended up getting a job, get married, have kids, it was really a transformational experience for him but after I had been there 2 years, I had established such a good reputation that now, whenever there was any martial arts event in Israel, I was always there as a guest of honor so for instance, Dennis Hanover who is a remarkable old-time martial artist, he and I were friends at that time. He did Kyokushinkai and his stories, boy, he's got some great stories. He did the first full-contact tournament in Israel ever and he decided he needed a half-time show so he invited one person to be the half-time show for his full-contact tournament. You know where this is going, it was me!

Jeremy Lesniak:

I do, I do.

James Keenan:

And whenever, say, Japanese martial artist from the JKA, they would come to visit Israel and it'd be a big deal. They always got brought to meet me. They'd have a tournament and I'd be sitting on the dais of honor next to the JKA representative that sort of thing so I started to get really well-known and then, one of the guys who started training with me said you know, in Israel, we have this fighting system. It's called Krav Maga and the founder of Krav Maga lives about half an hour south of here and how about you guys meet up? That would be a really cool thing so Imi Lichtenfeld, that's the name of the guy. Now, Imi, at this time was actually, he was pretty close to the age I am now because I'm just about to turn 71 and I think Imi might have been 71, 2 or 3, something like this. So, they brought him up, Imi, to meet me and that was another really important turning point for me because I thought that I had already pretty much reached the perfection of self-defense that I had throughout all the years and all the systems and by this time, I had picked up advanced ranks in a number of different martial arts. When I said picked up,



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I mean earned and I had synthesized a lot of these things sort of cross system so that I had, what I thought was, a very integrated and complete system for self-defense that wasn't solely oriented toward one type of art but it included things from many different streams and so, I met Imi and Imi and I hit it off right away. We just hit it off right away and so, for the next 5 years, I guess it was, I was, in the beginning I was with Imi almost every day and after that, I used to see him about several times a week. They had a list of all of the material that was in the Krav Maga curriculum and essentially, I made Imi defend to me every single one of the techniques as being the best, as being the best possible technique for a given situation. Now, what's interesting about this is that, at the time, Krav Maga was not very well-known or known at all, really, outside of Israel. I think at the time there was one guy in Philadelphia who had taken a Krav Maga course and that he was teaching there and that was it. By the time I got back to the United States in 1987, I think besides me there were only 3 people in the United States who were teaching Krav Maga. One in New York, one in California and one in Philadelphia and then there was me but I approached Imi from a different direction than the average person because it was, I had high reputation in Israel, everybody already thought I was a master and I came, essentially with masters' credentials and with a deep knowledge and broad knowledge of fighting hand-to-hand combat in general and so, at that time, because Krav Maga was looked at by the average Israeli as just basic self-defense, your average martial artist in Israel had the opinion of Krav Maga that, well, Krav Maga is just my arts. Simple self-defense, that's all. What the big deal? Well, it's actually much greater than that but they didn't respect it so they didn't investigate it and I investigated it with Imi in great detail and Imi, I think, had the same kind of mentality as me or that I have the same as him. When it came to wanting to do the absolute very best and never being satisfied, wanting to have the highest possible skill and Imi appreciated that in me and because I wasn't just a Krav Maga student, other words, I had learned Krav Maga and nothing else, Imi was able to talk to me in ways that he was not able to talk to the Israeli Krav Maga instructors and he was also able to hear things from me that he couldn't hear from anybody else because I had, in effect, established myself with him as a reliable source of information and so, the offshoot was that Imi used to call all the Krav Maga instructors in Israel to seminars that I would teach at the Wingate National Sports Institute and a lot of what I taught then was adapted into the body of Krav Maga and it's still there today. You won't hear that much because it doesn't fit the narrative of Israeli martial art because it's going to now have to say Israeli martial art plus all the stuff that Jim Keenan had put in it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And for people who don't know the story of Krav Maga, we did an episode on it. We'll make sure to link it in the show notes but for people who don't know that narrative as a non-Israeli and I'm going to take a guess here, a non-Jewish individual, that's a big deal.

James Keenan:



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Yes, non-Jewish, non-Israeli so it was a big deal. I was the first person, the first non-Israeli, non-Jew ever to receive the highest rank in Krav Maga and to be given a teaching license. Everybody else was from that cultural or religious background. You said you did an episode in Krav Maga?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah.

James Keenan:

Who were you talking to about Krav Maga?

Jeremy Lesniak:

We weren't. This was just a collection of research that we dug through books and websites and just coupled together.

James Keenan:

Unfortunately, and I apologize in advance to all those people out there who are sincerely trying to practice Krav Maga now but Krav Maga in the United States is not very high quality and there are long and complicated reasons for that but the main reason is that Imi Lichtenfeld had a very solid theoretical foundation for everything he did and he was constantly talking about it and he was telling the Israeli instructors as well, I am the only person in the world who I ever hear talking about Imi's theoretical foundation even though, some of the stuff were so simple. I'm just going to give you one example.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Please.

James Keenan:

Imi said that in order for a technique to be optimal as a self-defense technique, it had to satisfy 5 criteria. It had to be the shortest, the fastest, the strongest, the most natural and to the point and the to the point is the governor there but all 5 of those things had to be true at the same time so that it has to be the shortest under the circumstances, the fastest under the circumstances, the strongest under the circumstances and the most natural under the circumstances and the circumstances are dictated by what's the point. In other words, defense against the punch, defense against a knife, defense against a grab, anything like that and those 5 things, Imi repeated them like a mantra. In the years that I was in Israel, I could even tell you how many time I heard Imi say this in the presence of, not just me, but all the other Israeli instructors and most of them have drifted really far away from that and you can look at their, the techniques they teach and you can, just objectively, dismantle them just based on that.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Why do you think that is?

James Keenan:

There is so many pressures. There's so many pressures like, for instance, one of the negative pressures that affect Krav Maga now is MMA. That Krav Maga people think that they need to be a better MMA than the MMA people when that's not correct. That is just not correct. Also, something that causes drift and this is true, again, this is all my opinion and I could be just full of it, but something that causes drift in schools in general is that you have the need to pay the bills which means that student retention becomes an important thing and so you have to do things to retain the students so they'll keep paying from month to month and sometimes that means doing things that just entertain them. Introducing things, oh, this will be fun to do when it might not have anything to do with really trying to give a clean transmission of the martial art. You see what I'm talking about?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I do, yeah.

James Keenan:

So, I see that all over the place and sometimes I'll refer to, in Krav Maga, I'll talk about Krav Ma-tainment where you got this combination of Krav Maga and entertainment so that you got somebody who comes in, it's their 2nd class, okay, we're going to do defenses against knife. Wait, this is their 2nd class. One of the things that Imi built into the Krav Maga system is that the techniques you learn at the beginning form the foundation for all the techniques by the end so that you can sort of see the strain so if you haven't learned the beginning techniques, you really can't do the advanced techniques correctly. It would be like okay, welcome to my class. I know this is your first class but we're going to learn the tornado kick today because it's really fun. No. I mean, it might end up being fun but if you want to give a good transmission, that's not the way to do it. At least, I don't think that's the way to do it and another thing that I've seen come up being Krav Maga practices, the 2nd principle that Imi emphasized was that an application, self-defense response, had to work 99% of the time for 99% of the target audience. That's really important, 99-99, and the target audience can change so, for instance, something that will work when you are a Special Forces troop, you might not be able to do that if you are an elderly person so you have to have a technique that's going to work 99% of the time for your target audience if they're elderly, if they're young, if they're strong military age, if they're middle age. See? And where this, you'll see a fail in this, is you'll get a strong teacher and it's typically a guy, I don't mean to be sexist by saying he and I don't mean to be excluding women, be he will be going BOOM! BOOM! And see this technique and see, this is great! Now, everybody do that and the reason the technique works is because of him. His size, his strength, his particular ability. The technique won't actually be keyed to the target audience. See what I mean? And so, then, you'll get some small person, like imagine me when I was 14 and I'm trying to do the big muscle technique that the guy just showed and I'm wondering why it's not working



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or why it's so hard for me to do it is because I should've been doing it with something else. There's another thing that would've been better for me, my personal target audience, would have been better for me to do so, I just realized, at some point, I pulled out the soap box and I climbed up on it and I just started to rant. I'm really sorry.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's all good. This is what we do, this is what we do and I'm...yeah.

James Keenan:

I was going to say the thing is...I don't just have these things as an opinion. Here, we're talking and this is a lovely program and it's great for what it is but martial arts is not about talking. Martial arts is about doing and so, someone can say, well, I heard that blowhard Jim Keenan, he said this and fine, okay, maybe that blowhard Jim Keenan did say that but if you are with me, I can show you and let you feel it in yourself and for yourself, what's effective and what's not effective. I can show you what your basic assumptions are so that you have to make these assumptions before you can get to here and you might not be making the right assumptions about stuff and so, when you get together physically, suddenly everything can be much clearer and much more comprehensible and we're not sitting here being keyboard warriors and going dada-dada-dada-da I just told him I'm going to wear your nutsack for a hat.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm going to use that one. That's a new one. I like that. I'll be honest, I don't know who's getting the better end of that exchange but wonderful visual.

James Keenan:

Imi passed away in 1998 and my relationship with Imi was very close. I typically addressed him as father and...excuse me.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, it's okay. Take your time.

James Keenan:

Sometimes it's hard for me to talk about Imi because I just...I love him so much. It's not a matter that I loved him because the love is undying so when I came back to the United States, that's when I met Chan Lu Ping. Chan Lu Ping, a really excellent martial artist. I was introduced to him by some friends of mine from West Virginia and they're like you really got to meet this guy, he's really something and I did and my first impression, I was like, I said to my friend, what he's doing, give me a year of practice and I'll do it. See, I said that I was still on that path of less ego and more selflessness. Clearly, in 1987, I had that.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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It takes time.

James Keenan:

Yeah, it takes a lot of it. Anyway, Lu Ping and I became good friends and I think of him like a brother. He also passed away in 1998 so it was like a double whammy. Big blow to me. The wonder of Lu Ping and Lu Ping's big contribution to my personal practice was his emphasis on body structure and once I understood what he was talking about, it sort of revolutionized my physical performance in every way so that I could easily differentiate when I could use full body power, partial body power or any percentage from 100 to 0 of body power, just structurally and in movement and he taught but he was not so much a teacher as a researcher and I think this is why he and I became such good friends is because he had a resonance with my desire to get high skill. Just get high skill globally and he wanted to have high skill and he would just constantly research and try and analyze and experiment and do different things and he had a pretty deep background in Chinese martial arts and yeah, that's the most I want to say about Lu Ping outside of how wonderful he was as a person. He was a mathematician and he was teaching at UMass Amhurst. I told one of my friends who's also a kind of advanced mathematician what Lu Ping taught at university and my friend said that stuff is really hard. It's like you got to be a Brainiac. It was something like partial differential non-linear equation or something. I don't understand. I'm lucky I add 2 and 2 and get 5 so Lu Ping's intellect was very strong and he had, in the martial arts side, had a strong physical skill to back it up. What he did not have was much fighting experience and because I had a lot of fighting experience at the time, so, we sort of bounced off each other all the time. He had things I didn't have, I had things he didn't have so we just, we were like that from 1987 until he passed away and now, all of the people who taught me have passed away. It's this weird thing that you get to a certain age and people are just falling off the conveyor belt, you know? We're all riding the conveyor belt until we get to our predetermined end and suddenly, you look around and you see a lot of people had fallen off and you're still there and you're like what? Where did they all go? So, all of my closest friends and teachers, they're not with us anymore.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Does that affect your relationship to your training?

James Keenan:

I often feel, and I'm going to say this right out and it's very naked and vulnerable and I understand and us martial arts masters aren't supposed to be naked and vulnerable because we're tough and Karate Man heights is painted inside, sometimes I just get lonely. Sometimes I just get lonely because when you have practiced for over half a century, most of the people that you meet, will be people who want to learn from you, not people who have somehow exceeded you and you want to learn from them. We learn from each other all the time so I'm not talking about that natural human interaction that enriches each one of us constantly. I'm talking about wow, you have a skill that I have never seen in my life. After



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55 years, I've seen most of the skills and I've seen super excellent practitioners and I've seen lots of people who don't have the same attitude as me where their quest is for open-ended high skill. I was in an Isshin-ryū conference a couple of decades ago and I was teaching a bunch of black belts things and one of the black belts asked me about, I studied all these different martial arts and he said, didn't I ever hear the saying that one dog can't chase two rabbits and I said yes, I had heard that saying. I hope everybody out there in the audience has heard that saying. Essentially, it means you're not supposed to split your attention but I said yes, I had heard that saying but what was the rabbit? Was the rabbit a particular style? Or was the rabbit high skill in martial art?

Jeremy Lesniak:

What did he say?

James Keenan:

He didn't have anything to say. He just looked at me like saying oh, didn't think of that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And I suspect there are a lot of people who haven't thought of it that way. I'll be honest, that's probably the most articulate way of expressing something I've always felt.

James Keenan:

So, that's always been my rabbit and the thing is I would describe my martial arts practice as an internal practice in the sense that we have external art and internal arts. Although I am adept at many of these so-called external arts, my overarching practice is really Bagua and Bagua is the quintessential internal art. The difference for, it may be most of the audience already knows the difference between internal and external, but if you're practicing in a mode of externality, everything in the world is separate from you so, for instance, a heavy bag. The heavy bag is over there, I'm here, I'm hitting the heavy bag, it's over there. The heavy bag is not me, it's a target and so, if I'm engaged in a self-defense setting or something like this, it's like everything is targets. They're all separate from me. That's the essence of externality, separation. When you're engaging in the mode of internality, it's exactly the opposite. Everything is you. I am one with the force, the force is with me. Star Wars reference, I hope somebody out there laughed but there's no difference between you and the person that you're in relationship with and it just happens that at this moment that that relationship is unbalanced and taking the form of some kind of violence and your job in that interaction is to restore the balance. Your job isn't to be judged or carry out the law or anything like that. It's to restore balance and you restore balance in the way that the person you're interacting with will allow. Among the immediate physical changes that demonstrates internality and externality bring to bear are in the internal practice, there's no such thing as distance, speed, time. All those things that we think of like in boxing, I've got to get my timing right, all these certain stuff, no. That's all gone. That doesn't even exist. Hardly anybody practices in the mode of



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internality. There're a lot of people who, they think of internal and external, they go oh, external is hard, internal is soft. I think that's the most common misconception I see but you'll see a lot of people who are practicing Tai Chi, for example, which is supposed to be the standard bearer of internal practice but they're practicing entirely in an external mode so they're just doing a form and their mindset is external and not internal. What happens is that when you engage with somebody this way to both an onlooker and to the other participant in the relationship, it can seem like something magical happened. It will be like how did this happen? How did I get to the floor? I remember being up, now I'm down. How did I get there? It's very, very difficult to learn this which is one of the reasons why I think arts like Bagua and even Tai Chi is an internal art have practically died out. There are so few people. One of my students goes periodically to China and his, I think, it's part of his quest to try and find some Chinese person who's still doing this. I think the reason I was able to get some of these stuff is that the people who taught me were born, not just Chun Mei Li, because there were a couple of other California Chinese teachers that I've had. They were born in the late 1800s and they were getting things that allowed for different worldviews. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, alternate worldviews were not approved and this lead to things like religious persecution, attempts to eliminate things that were considered old, anything that would conflict with sort of the prevailing political point of view. There's good and there's bad about that but some things end up getting lost as a result. The cultural revolution, there was a reason why after the cultural revolution you found and up into the 1980s and 90s masters who were either 40 years old or 80 years old. There's a whole generation that was gone and it was because of things like the cultural revolution and even the Chinese themselves now criticize what happened. They recognized that something important was lost and it's very hard to get it back so there you go. Now, I'll send out to my listening audience, my listening audience.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Today they are! Absolutely!

James Keenan:

Look how quickly I claimed your podcast.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's why you outrank me in a variety of things.

James Keenan:

Anybody within the sound of my voice who thinks they can help me not be lonely and I'm happily married so, it's not that way but if you're a martial artist and you would like to engage in relationship, I am happy. I am here. I don't know how much longer I'll be here because I'm getting to the end of the conveyor belt.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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How would they reach you?

James Keenan:

Joey Estee, who is the kaichou of Dotokushin-Kai, he is probably the best person to get hold of me through and I think you can get hold of him through the Dotokushin website which I think you're providing a link to.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yes.

James Keenan:

So, that will be alright. Also, there's a link to my Facebook page. I don't use Facebook, really. I have a Facebook page because I gave into them. They all said you have to have a Facebook page. You have to have it so I have a Facebook page. Alrighty, that's a lot of talking. I just did a lot of talking.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It was great. It's good stuff.

James Keenan:

I generally don't like to talk about myself. In fact, if you search for me on the internet, I've gone to great lengths to try and keep myself invisible. What I wanted was I wanted people who were meant to train with me to find me but I didn't, I started, oh, this is quite a while ago now, I reverted to an actual traditional method of teaching martial arts which is not the sort of U.S. military inspired mass teaching. It's much more of a mentoring. Single person, small group mentoring along the path of martial arts and because I was never looking for commercial success, that was never going to be a component of my own martial journey, I could afford the luxury of having people discover and then, finding out whether or not I was the right person to work with because sometimes, people come to me and I work with them, I'm a pretty exacting teaching. I think it's better to learn things correctly to start with rather than correct the mistakes later. One of the things I remember, oh, this must have been 1988, somebody was learning Isshin-Ryu from me here in Massachusetts and they were just a white belt and I took them to the national headquarters in one of the Isshin-Ryu organizations with me for a visit because I knew the people and I was related to them organizationally and there was a class and my white belt was in the class, he told me that afterwards, when he was in the dressing room with the other green belts and brown belts and whatnot, they said to him, come on, what's your actual rank? You're not a white belt. Because it's not typical to teach people in detail and make them, have them perform the skills at a high level from the beginning and I do that so if somebody finds me, yay! And if not, I usually try to discourage people from training with me. The first time I talk to them, I'm usually doing my best to convince them not to train with me because if I can convince them not to train with me by talking to



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them so easily in the beginning, you just know they're never going to go anywhere. Not to say that they're...let me just frame all these a little bit because I don't want to sound like I'm some kind of maniac. People practice martial arts for many, many different reasons and almost every one of those reasons is a doggone good reason to practice. Some people practice because they want the social experience of being in class with others and it can be a wonderful social experience and you have your comrades in the arts and you all go out for pizza and you have fun and you practice together and you do things and that can be great. Some people practice like look at me, when I first started, I came from a position of incredible weakness. Some people start their practice from a position of fear. They're afraid and they want to get rid of that fear and this might be a path to get rid of it and that's wonderful. That's also a good reason. Some people are really into the sport aspect, either competition like sparring or they like the performance of kata as a performance, wonderful. Some people get into it because they want to connect to the culture, the language. My father, when he first got me into training, he said to me that it was okay if I would learn this fighting art but I had to learn the culture behind it as well and that was how, as a combat veteran, that's how he sort of justified it a little bit, letting his son learn to fight. Some people want to preserve that culture and the tradition because there are arts that if you look at them, they're almost like a museum exhibit and that's also glorious. Some people just want to do self-defense. A whole of these things are wonderful reasons to practice. I've been asked what would my life be like if I had never trained in martial arts? Thing is I started as a teen. I have no idea what it would be like but I'm sure it would not be anything like it is now and I've had, I would teach children sometimes and a father would bring me his little boy saying his little boy was beat up at school and so, I will just take the boy aside and say okay, what are they doing? Tell me what they're doing. Give me an example and the kid would say okay, they did this to me. So then, I would say okay, if they try to do this, this is what you do and then, we'll practice it a little bit together. I'd say did they do anything else? Yeah, sometimes they'll try and do this. Okay, when they try and do that, you do this and then, we'd do it together little bit, little bit. I have one father who came, brought his son like that, he only came for one lesson. The father came back and told me the son had changed his whole environment so these reasons are all wonderful reasons and I don't want anybody ever to think that I don't think they're wonderful. The athleticism, the dedication, the work, just plain joy they can go in to the practice, it's just that not all of those are my path. That's all. I'm just in on a different path. Not that my path is better, it's just a different path.

Jeremy Lesniak:

This has been a ton of fun and hang on the line, we'll talk a few minutes more but as we wind down the show, the piece that we're going to share out with everyone, I ask all of the guests to leave us with some parting words however you want to think of that. Some people it's words of wisdom, some people sometimes it's just a thank you to the audience, it can be a lot of different thing. If I will ask you how you want to end your episode here, what would you say to the audience?

James Keenan:



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Thank you for listening and I'm just going to say that when you're alive, be alive. I said on my tombstone, this is the motto that I want: when he was alive, he was alive. Be present for your own life. Don't sit back and let life just pass you by. It's just this one and you need to participate in it. You need to live your life and be there for yourself, for other people and somebody asked me recently in a dinner if there was one word that I would use to describe myself, then I had to think for a second then I said, the word I would use is present. Be present. Be here. Be now. There's only this moment. Live in it. enjoy it. give it your all. If you haven't read it, Read Rudyard Kipling's poem, If. Look it up, it's on the internet and give every minute of your life your full effort and you'll have a good life.

Jeremy Lesniak:

As you can probably tell, I had a great time talking with Grandmaster Keenan. Wonderful stories, so open and even as he described it, vulnerable at times. To borrow some words from what he said, we're all on a different path but the fact that we are all on a martial arts path brings us together. It feels like we're all on roads that's headed in roughly the same direction though some of ours are straighter, some have more hills, some are a little bit twistier and there are pros and cons to every approach. I really did enjoy my time today and I always loved these stories and here we are, 432 episodes in and I'm still not bored so thank you, Sir, for coming on the show, for sharing and I do hope that we find time to connect soon. If you want to learn more about Grandmaster Keenan's school, find a transcript, photos, head to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com episode 432 and you'll get everything you're looking for. Sign up for the newsletter while you're over there. We send out discounts and information, new products, even original content. There's stuff that goes there that doesn't go up anywhere else. You can find us on social media, we're @whistlekick. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram and my personal email address jeremy@whistlekick.com. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!