



Episode 438 – Master Iain Armstrong | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello, everyone! Welcome, this is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 438. Today, my guest is Master Iain Armstrong. I'm Jeremy Lesniak, your host on this show, the founder here of whistlekick and just the guy who loves martial arts, training, talking about it, pretty much the whole gamut. If it relates to martial arts, I'm probably into it and that's why we do what we do like this show. We do this show twice a week. We offer a variety of products at whistlekick.com and at Amazon and we've got other things going on like martial journal. Well, the best thing to do is go to whistlekick.com, check out all the links, see everything we got going on and if you make a purchase which helps support the show, of course, and keeps it going, use the code `PODCAST15`, saves you 15%, lets us know that by doing this show, it's turning into some sales because that's really only when we know. Today's guest, the moment you hear his voice, you'll probably have an idea of where he is and that will tell you where he's from but it's not where he is now. Master Armstrong lives really half a world away doing what he loves, passing on the knowledge that he's gained and it's very clear that he's doing it the way that he feels is best. The way that makes the most sense for the type of training he enjoys and wants to hand down to the next generation of martial artists. We had a great conversation. I'm sure you're going to enjoy it so here we go. Master Armstrong, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Iain Armstrong:

Thank you, Jeremy! Thank you very much.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Of course, thanks for coming on. We've got one of these here where I'm starting, we're starting a conversation here, early for me, late for you because you're on the other side of the globe.

Iain Armstrong:

I am indeed. We're right up in the mountains, in the very northwest of Thailand so from where I am, it's about 30 kilometers to Burma. It's Thailand's most remote province. The only province in Thailand not to have a cinema.

Jeremy Lesniak:

None at all?

Iain Armstrong:

No. No cinema, no shopping malls and only one main road runs right through the province here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

People don't tend to end up in extremely remote areas like that by chance. It's usually by choice. Is there a reason you ended up there?

Iain Armstrong:

That's very complex but I spent the whole of my adult life kind of engrossed in Kung Fu and somehow, for the Kung Fu ideal for the ultimate Kung Fu school, they're up in the remote mountains in Asia amid the forests, amid the clouds. This is how I see the ideal Kung Fu school which is pretty much what I tried to create here. The obvious question is why are you in Thailand, not China? I did my key training in Singapore so my teacher and the school that I'm a part of based in Singapore, when I started in the 1980s, China was pretty much off limits. You can't get a visa to go to China and anyway, most of the best Kung Fu masters were kicked out of China after the civil war so they tended to concentrate in places like Thailand, Hongkong, Southeast Asia so I've been training in Southeast Asia since the '80s and I always used to travel a lot with my teacher to Thailand. We had a kind of a deal whereby, in order for him to kind of concentrate on Kung Fu, he needed to go away from all the kind of hustle in Singapore so I would fly with him to travel to Thailand, have a holiday in Thailand and in return, he'd teach me Kung Fu and it was a bit of an excuse to get away from his wife, really, and have some fun in Thailand but we used to get an overnight bus because this was long before budget airlines so we'd get the overnight bus from Singapore through Malaysia. In those days, part of the bus journeys is on dirt roads. It's very different to now. We busted out through Malaysia, into the south of Thailand and spend a while in Thailand training so I've been training Kung Fu since end of the '80s, start of the '90s and it's a pretty good place to be. It's a pretty nice place to be.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Thailand is certainly on my list to travel. Possibly, the next place. We'll have to see.

Iain Armstrong:

You definitely need to pass a visit here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'd love to but I think anybody listening can hear your accent and say there's something there. You don't sound Thai. You sound like you're from somewhere else. How did you end up there?

Iain Armstrong:

Oh yeah, simple one. My wife is Thai. A lot of people ask this question. First of all, for the benefit of all your listeners, if you can't tell from my accent, I'm English and first of all, I was thinking about could I set up a residential Kung Fu training center in England? Right from kind of mid-80s, I've been running training camps, residential training camps in Kung Fu. We'd hire caravans or we'd hire accommodation for a week and concentrate on training. Sometimes it was even tents, sometimes we'd do camping and when I trained in Singapore, it was full-time training so you fly over there and live at the Kung Fu school and it was Kung Fu-focused all day, 24/7 and the way that you learn in that situation is very different from sort of the classic kind of if I go down to a martial arts cup two nights in a week and I always wanted to give more to my students the opportunity to kind of immerse themselves in learning and training so wouldn't it be great if all Kung Fu camps became permanent? Well, in England, the weather is against you. Costs are against you and kind of overregulation of business is against you so it wasn't going to happen then we started looking at Southern Spain so from England, that doesn't seem too far away but it's a lot warmer and the food's better and it's cheaper and it's an easier environment in which to operate so had a good look at southern Spain but the reality was, at the time we were doing really well in England and my martial arts sensei was booming and just wasn't being sensitive to set up a new venture and then, I met my present wife. It was just the very beginning of 2006 and my wife's Thai so I started coming to Thailand to visit my future wife. I don't always travel to Thailand quite regularly because going out to China and Singapore, we'd spent time in Thailand but this time, came over to visit [00:09:01] my wife and then, I started thinking you know what? Now, this will be a really good place for that residential Kung Fu school because here, the weather's really good. It's much too perfect. The food's really good, it's just a really nice country to be in, lots of people come here to travel, come here to holiday and at that time, it'd be pretty easy to set up our business here so okay, yeah. This looks like it could be a go and we looked around at a number of different places in Thailand but eventually, we chose this one and in retrospect, I think, it's a pretty good decision. Now and again, you'd always think about somewhere else but in general, I think we made a pretty good choice.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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I want to talk about this desire for a fulltime center. This is something that I think a lot of martial arts instructors dream of but few actually set out to create but before we get there, I want to go back to your beginnings into Kung Fu. I assume you started in the UK?

Iain Armstrong:

Yeah, let me just think about the best response to that. I could talk all night but I kind of state that I came from an area, an environment, a family where you needed to fight. It's a very aggressive kind of environment and I wasn't a kid with good social skills. If you got the way, you can talk your way out of the situation, if you haven't, you got to fight your way out so I kind of grew up having to fight. For a long time, I was skeptical about martial arts. My brother did judo and I wasn't having any of it because I can't see the point of having a fight and not being able to punch somebody so I looked at it as well. He was beating me so I don't think I need to learn this. I'll just keep fighting and I went on like that until I was 14 and then, I got beaten by a boxer and he really pounded my nose in. took a week to stop the bleeding and it still bends out to one side if you can see, it bends to one side and I thought, you know what? I think it's time I started learning boxing so before I know it, I was up at the local boxing club and boxed for about 2 years but truthfully, I wasn't going to make it as a boxer and I'm not somebody that likes to settle for second best. I want to be up there, I want to be the best.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Why wouldn't you have made it as a boxer? Why wouldn't you've been the best?

Iain Armstrong:

When you get into that kind of competitive environment, we were sparring, I would spar 6 times a week and I wasn't winning them all. I clearly didn't have outstanding talent as a boxer, I wasn't a natural and I'm kind of digressing a little bit now but we'll come back.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Totally fine.

Iain Armstrong:

Over the years, I've trained a lot of people for competition fighting. For a number of years, I was coach to the British Sanda teams. Sanda is Chinese full contact fighting, probably wushu competition, Chinese boxing, I used to take the British teams to the European championships, world championships. I coached a lot of guys up and almost all of the people that come, you know they never make it to the top. Now and again, you get a student who is outstandingly talented and yeah, if you stick it out, you train hard, you don't get distracted, you might do it but not everybody has got what it takes to be the top reign and even as a 14 year old, I was winning some, losing some but I knew full well that I wasn't going to the top. That's how it is. Some people have the idea, the notion that you can take anybody and if you give them



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the right martial arts teacher, they will be the next Connor McGregor but it's just not like that. some people have got it in them but myself don't have it. That's my opinion after sort of 40 years of doing this so I wasn't heading with a top in boxing so I just went back to street fighting and it was only when I started university that I got the chance to do, kind of like full-on martial arts and back when I was a child, I decided I didn't want to do judo, I wanted to do Karate but in the '60s, I even thought Karate meant doing this kind of weird chop onto somebody's shoulder and they drop dead. Of course, that was untrue, that as what my mum thought Karate was in the 1960s so there was no way I was going to do that because I would be Karate chopping people and killing them all over the place and that's not what you want your son to do so no Karate for me and it's a specific rural, kind of suburban small town, you wouldn't find any kind of exotic martial arts. Maybe Karate, definitely judo but beyond that, probably not much but when I went to university up in central London, they got loads so I signed up for a club which did Kung Fu and Taekwondo. Bit of a weird mix but I liked the look of it so okay, that's what I'm going to do. Got the opportunity, I'm going to do it and the Kung Fu part of it was ran by a guy who have trained at [00:17:23] association in Singapore. He was a student of my present teacher. He'd come over to study at the university at London and he's been encouraged to start up a little Kung Fu club there so that was what I signed up for and been doing it ever since. In the end, I had to choose between the Kung Fu and the Taekwondo. I dropped the Taekwondo because the Kung Fu was a bit more interesting for me. Something with a lot of depth to Kung Fu and I kind of liked that but I guess, kind of maybe to sort of elaborate on that a bit, probably for the first 4 years of doing Kung Fu, I wasn't that serious at it because I was also trying to pass my degree at university which meant I couldn't spend all my time focusing on martial arts and then, as the time ticked by, kind of got more into it, more into it and I had a, through my kind of teenage years going through my 20s, I used to fight a lot. They are not martial arts, just kind of street fights but one of the Kung Fu teachers that was influential on me said to me a lot later in my life, when you take a bus, you better make sure when you get off and that life that I'd been living was starting to get a little bit crazy and when you're a fighter in the cities, it's only a matter of time before you either get badly hurt or you get up in prison. That's the only place you can go unless you just kind of get out of it and when you're used to this kind of thing, you're used to having the life of fighting a lot and to just suddenly drop it is very difficult but the martial arts is something that gives you a discipline and you end up with a teacher who's a kind of mentor that's guiding you in a positive direction and it takes all that kind of uncontrolled energy and it points you in a direction and you start to do something with it so when I got really seriously into Kung Fu, I just kept kind of in this time that I knew I got to make a change. Things have got to change otherwise, they're going to go bad and it gave my life a different direction and just kind of throwing myself into it going over the training in Singapore, kind of becoming a martial arts teacher, it was a good thing for me because it gave me a direction, it gave me something different to do.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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It's quite the 180 to start off fighting on the street and boxing because a boxer bested you and then, back to fighting on the street and ultimately, stepping into to embrace traditional martial arts. That's quite the transition.

Iain Armstrong:

Yeah, the funny thing is, for most people, they did martial arts because they want to learn to fight and in many respects, I was doing it to get me away from fighting. It seems when I started you always want to be a better fighter and you always want to have more of an edge because you don't want to come second so it's always, there's always the attraction of you always want to be a better fighter but I think, by the time I was in my mid-20s, there's this realization that something's got to change and I was a fairly aggressive young man. People who know me now would think no, no, there's no way Master Iain could be kind of aggressive or nasty or whatever because he's a really calm Kung Fu master but not in those days.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Where did it come from? Where was that aggression?

Iain Armstrong:

Let me think. Just the area where I grew up and the life that I'd led, you had to be tough and aggressive otherwise you're going to get really put down and bullied so when I first started school, I used to get bullied a lot and before long, I was one of the kids bullying the other kids because you had no choice. You either toughen up and be one of the tough kids or you get beaten up every day and the whole kind of culture, you see I'm from the southern edge of London. Most of London, you have this culture of it's all about being tough, it's all about being hard. Who's the hardest? Who's the hard man? Pretty similar in cities around most of the world, I guess, but everybody's trying to be the toughest, everybody's trying to be the hardest and the further you work your way up the stack, the tougher it gets and the higher the odds are and you become used to it and more frequently you fight, the more normal it is to fight and the more focused you are in fighting. That's how it works and as the fights get rougher, you get rougher to match, otherwise you got to clock out so there's always that pressure. You're always getting tougher and you can look in from the outside of the situation like that and say, well, you can just step out of that. you don't have to be the toughest, you don't have to be fighting all the time and it's kind of true. When that's the environment that you're used to and that's where all your friends are and that's all you do, it's quite hard to just suddenly drop it so, I can't remember how we got onto this. Let me have a think.

Jeremy Lesniak:

But we were talking about the transition from being a fighter to a martial artist.

Iain Armstrong:



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Doing Kung Fu, yeah. At that time, I knew deep down I needed a discipline. I needed somebody that could kind of put me straight and it just so happened that 1987, to be part of the tea from the UK that went out to Singapore for demonstration and competition in Singapore and when we got there, the guys there, they were tough. They were tough cookies and that sits with me just right because that was what I needed. Me, at that time, I didn't need a kind of a nice, calm, philosophical martial arts teacher. I didn't really need the classical Mr. Miyagi. I needed some pretty tough guys that I could look up to, I could relate to and in Singapore, I found that so it kind of clicked and I guess in many respects I was the kind of student that a lot of Kung Fu teachers are looking for because I can already fight and didn't need to be taught exactly how to fight. It was just okay, now we're making you do it properly. Now, we're sharpening you up. Now, we'll coordinate you. Now, we got you looking straight and we did a lot of very traditional training but yeah, that was, it ended up, I found by chance just the right club where they were really tough and the boss, the master there, spoke very good English. In that era, I say even now in Kung Fu, it's not difficult to find a Chinese teacher but it's incredibly difficult to find one that speaks good English and when they don't speak good English, they can't convey any of the deeper kind of concepts of the art. You can show the basic moves but you can't communicate the depths of the art and the finer points of the art if you can't use language so, yeah, just was kind of lucky and that's how it all started.

Jeremy Lesniak:

One of the things that we hear come through in these stories on the show is how a very slightly, even slightly different roll of the dice means that the student may not have found the right instructor. Here, you're talking about, really needing an instructor who trains and teaches in an aggressive enough style that it's going to resonate for you but also have the communication skills to provide you the depth to what you're training and it sounds like, we're talking about a very narrow, as you've said, subset of Kung Fu teachers in that region and your life would've been completely different.

Iain Armstrong:

Definitely, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And we hear that week after week. It used to blow my mind and the only thing that I can think of is that old adage when the student is ready, the master appears. There really feels like there's something almost supernatural about it.

Iain Armstrong:

Yup. There's 2 ways you can look at it. You can use statistics and your mathematical self or you can say well, this is the Tao, this is the way of the universe. Things happen because they're meant to happen but yeah, that's martial arts for you, I guess. I wonder whether at what extent it will continue. I thought that



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you have to speak about this debate now in martial arts which kind of says our traditional martial arts are dead because it's all about MMA but you got to MMA but I don't think you get that kind of dynamic between student and teacher that you do in the traditional martial arts. To me, it's two different things. There's always going to be a role for the old style stuff.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I agree. I completely agree and not to say that there are not some MMA schools that don't bring some of those traditional elements, the culture, the formality, the training methods in, but they're the exception, not the rule based on what I've heard and what I've seen.

Iain Armstrong:

In Kung Fu, shaolin Kung Fu is generally full. It started at about 500 A.D. when the monk, Bodhi Dharma, was appointed abbot of the shaolin temple. It's got about a 1500-year history. MMA, you can probably debate exactly when it started but it was not much about 20 years ago and there hasn't been a lot of time to develop the culture and tradition. For Westerners studying Asian martial arts, as well as studying the martial art, you really start to study the culture that it's associated with so you study Kung Fu, you start to really study Chinese culture. You start to need to understand the philosophies that underlie it which in classic Kung Fu, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism; these are the principal philosophies that have influenced it. If you study Karate, Aikido, you got to be studying Japanese culture, Japanese philosophies. You do Muay Thai, maybe you're studying Thai culture. If you train in a Western art, do you really study your own culture? I don't think so. It's more just kind of concentrating on training so yeah, different. Very different thing out of it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely. When you think about your early training, where do those roots for fulltime school and building these, I don't know if we can call this a retreat, but this destination training facility. When did those ideas start?

Iain Armstrong:

My first trip to Singapore was '87, I went back in '89. In '92, I went back on my own. That's the first time I made the journey on my own and from then on, I used to go once or twice a year for training in Singapore and in Singapore, we had our own clubhouse so every Kung Fu club and there were loads had its own premises. You couldn't not have premises. You had to have somewhere where you were based where you kept all your weapons, all the equipment, where the people met so they would have fulltime schools over there and we would go and we'd sleep at the school so we effectively turned their Kung Fu school into a Kung Fu retreat, at least, temporarily by turning up there and sleeping on the floor so that was my kind of really influential training, obviously. Training there set me up and you can't come back to the west and teach a few nights a week in a hired hall and get the same result, same atmosphere, just



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doesn't happen so trying to recreate that was always my goal in the west and first of all, we did it by having these training camps. We'd go away for a weekend or a week and then we train fulltime and then, I think, in 1998, where I got my first fulltime martial arts center in the UK and that was a massive step but the students aren't there all the time. They come in different evenings, we used to train at the weekends as well so some of them would be there 5 days a week but it's never quite the same as, it's not just the training you get, it's the kind of eating together, the whole kind of you spend all your time with the other martial arts people. You talk martial arts, you eat martial arts. It's a whole kind of immersion experience and having a fulltime martial arts center is a great step forward but it's still, it doesn't get you there. The next step was setting up the residential center and even when you don't have a fulltime training center, you blame the fact that you don't train enough on the fact that you haven't got a fulltime place. When you get a fulltime place, it's like oh yeah, but people can't come at this time, they can't come at that time, that's why we're not training fulltime, that's why we're not training enough and when we get the retreat where they're here all the time, they got all the time here and you find you still can't do all the training that you wanted to do because I haven't got enough energy, you just run out of gas so you'll always be wanting to do more than you actually can but when you get to the kind of residential school, that's about as far as you can go.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Tell us about this school, this facility, whatever you call it because school sounds like it's not an all-encompassing a term, this location that you have in Thailand. Tell us about that. What does it look like, what is the training like, who's training there? Give us the skinny.

Iain Armstrong:

We're kind of spread out on the mountainside up in the north of Thailand and we've got a, what we call training areas, we call them, so matted areas where we train. Two of them are roofed, one of them is open but the ones with roofs don't have walls so it's a kind of open sided training area. It rarely gets cold here so you don't have to worry about getting cold so you don't have to worry about it getting cold so it's great to be out training with the breeze going and coming through. You need a roof to protect you from the sun and the rain but they're not walled in so you get a great view all the time looking out over the mountains. We got the gym with the various training equipment. We got a room where we keep all the weapons and actually, we turned it into a sort of Kung Fu museum so our club in Singapore closed down a couple of years ago and we managed to rescue quite a lot of the stuff from there, the weapons, some of the old treatise, the books and ship them up to Thailand so we're a Kung Fu museum which is kind of bristling with all sorts of Kung Fu weapons. We got a sort of restaurant here, kitchen, canteen, however you like to call it, where we eat and then, we've got sleeping quarter so some people have, usually it's a shared room. You got a few private rooms, we charge more for those, and yeah, it's kind of creeping up the mountain side and everything's quite spread out so you need to walk from one place to the next and it's good because you're out in the fresh air kind of moving around. You get the good chi, you get the good views, you get a bit of fresh air and sunlight. That's a pretty good way to live so kind of,



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I guess, it's my project to creating what I viewed as being the ultimate martial arts training camp. Yeah, it's kind of living the dream.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It sounds like it and I'm sure we got a lot of instructors listening right now, nodding along, that understanding, the ability to train more, the ability to train deeper when you can dedicate yourself and from the people that we've talked to, at least on this show from my experiences, it seems like this is more common with Kung Fu, with Chinese arts than it is with Japanese, Okinawan and Korean arts. Is that your experience too or maybe you can't make a judgment on that?

Iain Armstrong:

I can't make an informed judgment because I'm quite specialized at Kung Fu and though, I have some knowledge of other Asian martial arts, well actually no, what I kind of do because Thai boxing and Burmese boxing, yeah I have a quite a good idea of what they do because of where I'm based and they have training camps and they very often live at the training camp so they do a lot. On the other hand, I do tend to obviously keep an eye on what's happening in the marketplace and they're setting up, the idea of setting up the residential training center is becoming more and more popular. When I look at Western people setting up residential training centers, yeah, they're still not that many. There's still not many and maybe there's a few more in Kung Fu than there are in the Japanese martial arts but the number is still pretty small whereas, I believe, that in the states here, there's quite a few sort of residential MMA camps and also, down in Brazil. You got a lot of places in Brazil doing MMA and BJJ. In China, there's a lot of places offering residential Kung Fu training and that started off with the kind of very commercialization of shaolin temple in China and that got to a point where there's actually a national significance because of the amount of foreign currency they were drawing in China but when they ran out of room around the shaolin temple to be able to build any more martial art schools, they kind of spread out to [00:45:49] mountains and various other locations in China so going to China to train is very big business. In Japan, you don't seem to get anything like that so much. There are martial art schools open in Japan that are open to foreigners but it's not big business for them but the amount of money that the foreigner pays for martial arts training to someone in rural China would seem like quite big money but for somebody in Japan, probably seems it's just not worth it, that's probably what they're thinking. Thailand is somewhere in the middle. Thailand don't have anything like it as much as Japanese but they did more than China, Muay Thai.

Jeremy Lesniak:

How has your training, if we look at it now and your, not the very earliest days of your training, but the early days where you said you were serious about it and it sounds like it was just after you finished at university. If we contrast those two periods of time, what's changed for you?

Iain Armstrong:



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When I contrast between which two periods?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now and yeah, now and then.

Iain Armstrong:

Well, the truthful answer is now, I'm getting old. It gets harder every year. It's kind of funny but it's not funny. I'm going to be 57 next month and it's really starting to get a lot more difficult. The energy's not there that used to be there and now, technically, I'm pretty good but I don't have the energy I used to have. In the beginning, I had loads of energy but the technical skill wasn't there so, in the beginning, I used to do loads and loads of physical training. Now, concentrate more on the technical training but to kind of give you a more interesting insight, I would say that I started training in 1981. I started kind of really doing it seriously 5 or 6 days a week, at about '85. First trip to Singapore was in '87, training in Singapore and, let me get the date right, 1993. That's when I won my first world championship. That was in Los Angeles in the States.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We haven't even talked about competition. Tell us more about that.

Iain Armstrong:

As a youngster, I think it's normal that you want to do competitions. It's kind of testing yourself. It's about testing your boundaries and I used to do competitions and I got one British champion doing weapon routines so I got picked for the international team so we get sent out to the States and we got a gold medal doing the double axes. That was my first world championship win and about, 4 to 6 weeks after I won that world championship, I went back to Singapore to train with my teacher and he was the kind of classic Chinese Kung Fu teacher and he sort of said to me, Iain, so now you're world champion, it is time we started training properly. So, we then proceeded to spend 6 weeks on Horse Stance training. Not just Horse stance but the walking stance as well. He said okay, this year, I'm going to sort this dance out and we just did stance work, stance work, straight back, straight back and that was it. Came back from the world championships and we just started to work on the Horse stance but I think from that point on, you know what, we got to take this one seriously so we went right back to basics, just kind of like everything you learned, throw it out the window because we're going to learn how to do it properly now and that was all we did. The stance training, the next year it was [00:52:03] the first routine, the basic routine but I got kind of used to what are we going to do? Oh, we're going to do the basics so I spent years on that and then, I said okay, one year, so we'll be doing [00:52:21] training again? I think no. Let's do the more advanced one. It's like I almost fell over kind of thing, like he actually, yeah, decided that you're actually getting somewhere so that was kind of good, good insight into how it used to be.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, there's something really telling in that statement. This year, we're going to work on the advanced forms.

Iain Armstrong:

That really is okay, grasshopper, I think you're ready. It was always this, this was the funny thing, there was always an assumption: as a non-Chinese, you were never going to make it in Kung Fu because I heard Chinese people never made it in Kung Fu. To a larger extent, they were right because it was almost unheard of to get a foreigner that could do it properly and still is. I was kind of lucky because I had a teacher who was patient. He was kind of quiet, he thinks outside the box and he used to say to me, Iain, if you want to succeed in Kung Fu, you have to start to think like a Chinese and I spent years and years, trying to get my head around how Chinese people think and you do need to start thinking like a Chinese, just start living your life like a Chinese. It helps a lot to kind of read up on Chinese philosophy, Chinese thinking but the funny thing was that most of the Westerners, not just at our club, I mean, Kung Fu was incredibly networked in southeast Asia. Everybody knew everybody else and everybody went to socialize and visit and network with everybody else so sometimes, 5 nights a week, we would be out with other Kung Fu clubs and some of them would have Western students and generally, the consistent thing was the Westerners dropped out. They do it for a while and they give up, they drop out and I didn't drop out and all the people that started with us, it was only myself and one other guy [00:55:16] that didn't drop out and they started to latch on to this that it's okay, this guy is really serious. This guy actually follows his teacher, does all that his teacher says. He's polite and respectful and suddenly, doors open and people start teaching things and people start talking to you and step by step, we started to learn how to really do it and 2006, we went to China and we were right out in somewhere where you don't see many Westerners. At dinner with various other kind of really high up Kung Fu masters and when you go to dinner, typically part way through, you have to get up and demonstrate your Kung Fu. They don't have a kind of formal demonstration. You go out to dinner and partway through dinner, everybody kind of gets up and does a Kung Fu routine and they looked at, it was myself and Dougal, my training brother there, and they looked at us and their jaws just kind of dropped and it's like hold on a minute, these two foreigners are actually doing Kung Fu properly. That's not supposed to happen. They're not Chinese, how come they do it? Of course, my teacher is absolutely gloating like yes, yes. You've had to accept that my students can actually do it but they normally, the Chinese, generally assume that as a Westerner, you got no hope whatsoever but if you actually get it, they're very, very impressed so yeah, that was always kind of gratifying.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm sure. I'm sure. Now, today, we've talked about the past, we've talked a bit about what's going on today. Let's look into the future and I'll let you choose the horizon if we're looking out 6 months or 10



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years or something in between or even beyond, what are you working for towards? Do you have goals? Are there things that you're striving to accomplish?

Iain Armstrong:

Quite definitely, the role of any martial arts master is to pass on their art and I mean, this is particularly relevant with something like Kung Fu and our association set up in 1954 so I am the 3rd generation and since 1954, we've gained in strength, we've grown in strength and we got the real, full, undiluted Chinese Kung Fu and my task is clear: it's to pass it on to next generation so that when I'm gone, the art and the club is still alive so the master's job is to safeguard the art through to the next generation. That's what it is. If people get, there's a lot of misconceptions about this. What does a master mean? Does it mean that I'm the greatest martial artist in the world? Does it mean I'm perfect? No, it means that you're the one with the responsibility that you got to keep it alive. You're the kind of custodian of the art and your job is to make sure it doesn't die so for me, that's it and it's a hard task and I got a lot of good students but none of them are ready to take it on, take on the role and I can already feel that I can't do what I used to be able to do. I'm not, for my age, actually physically, I'm pretty good but there's that, for my age thing, 57, another 10 years, I'm going to be 67. How much more am I going to be able to do then? In 15 years, I'm 72. So, I got to pass it on and that's really, I guess, what I'm a bit preoccupied with at the moment. I've worked my adult life to promote this society and this art and it's time now to pass it on and it's kind of a hard thing and then, again, looking to the future, everybody has to kind of steer their club, their art, their group, they have to make difficult choices and we have to say, what's relevant about Kung Fu? Is it still relevant in 2019? Is there still any point to it? Is it still appropriate? To me, the answer is it's a definite yes but we don't live in a kind of island society that we used to live in. Everything now is getting more and more regulated, more controlled. This is a bit where you are but you tend not to need to fight so much but on the other hand, Kung Fu, some respects, it's the kind of physical manifestation of Zen. Kung Fu is very much about the kind of mind, body link. Mind, body, spirit, breath and it's a way of accessing your mind through your body and there's absolutely no doubt that stress levels in our modern society are going through the roof and the more that people become stressed are the more that they're overstimulated, their mind is overstimulated, the more they need something which fixes that and Kung Fu does the job. Kung Fu is a great way to calm the mind, to connect the body and the mind to get you thinking deeper, thinking clearer, thinking more creatively and my take is that as we progress over the next whatever 20 years, the need to physically defend yourself is going to do down and down but the need to look after yourself mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, that need is going to go up and up and up as the world becomes more stressed and more screwed up. It's going to be more and more difficult to hold it together and Kung Fu addresses that and it's kind of that's honestly the biggest relevance of what we do over the next 20 years or so. I have some students that are quite convinced that society's going to break down fairly soon and it's going to be a free for all and then, you really need your physical Kung Fu and maybe you will. I think it's going to take a bit more than 20 years.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Hopefully. Hopefully, it's going to take a very long time. Hopefully, it's never.

Iain Armstrong:

Yeah. Maybe if you really like the violent side of martial arts, maybe you're busting for the half but yeah, I think it's going to be a challenging time during past my children's lifetime but I think the next 20 years, things are going to be tough but the big challenges are going to come from the stress that our society puts on itself.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I would agree. If people want to learn more about you and your school, the center, again, I'm struggling with the right word for what to call it because it used to transcend my ideals.

Iain Armstrong:

We use to call it Kung Fu retreat.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Kung Fu retreat? Okay. If people want to learn more about your retreat or find you online, where would they go?

Iain Armstrong:

kungfuretreat.com, type that in and you'll find us. If you can't remember that, Kung Fu Thailand, remember that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay, great. Well, this has been a lot of fun. I've learned a lot about you and your story today has been very different from a lot of the stories we've heard and yet, similar enough that I can relate to it, at least a bit, so I appreciate that and as we head out, I'd like to ask for you to send us out. What parting words would you give to the listeners today?

Iain Armstrong:

First one would be don't just work on your body. Work on your mind and if you do, you'll probably succeed a lot better and the second one, I started martial arts, I wanted to be a great fighter because that would fix my problems, yeah? If I had a problem with somebody, I would just flatten them. It doesn't work so as I kind of learned that, kind of focused a lot of attention with how to deal with people. Learn a lot more about human psychology, how to persuade people rather than threaten people and I wish I kind of learned that earlier on because that really makes a difference so, actually, the people skills



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are really important. When you make it a certain way in martial arts without them but if you want to get to the top, you need to have that so work on your people skills and most definitely, I've been in situations where I could have fought my way out, talked my way out of them and that's why I'm still here so it's good to remember that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We're all different. We train different things in different places in different ways and yet, time and again, I find things about the guest and their training that just make sense to me. I've long felt that there's no superior style or method of training or even reason for your training and today's episode reinforces that for me. I can see the value in being in the jungle of Thailand, training hours every day. In fact, there's something incredibly romantic about it and I hope I get to do it but that's not to say that that's necessarily the right way, at least not for me, and I hope that we can all get better from this episode, from other episodes seeing the value in what each of us does and learning and sharing. Thank you, Master Armstrong for coming on the show and doing just that, for sharing, for being open with who you are and why you do what you do. If you want to check out the show notes, go to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. This is episode 438. You can find some photos, transcript, links, all kinds of good stuff to give you more information about this episode and Master Iain. If you want to learn more about what we do, go to whistlekick.com. Don't forget the code PODCAST15 will get you 15% off every single thing in the store and that's one of the ways to help us out. How else can you help us? Sharing this or another episode, leaving us a review on Facebook, Apple Podcast, Google, pretty much anywhere you could leave a review would be helpful to us and if you want to follow us on social media, we're @whistlekick everywhere you can think of. My email address, jeremy@whistlekick.com. That's all I've got for you. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day.