



#### Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello everyone, welcome! This is whistlekick episode 447. Today, we're talking about finding your own path in the martial arts and I'm joined by a guest. I'm Jeremy Lesniak and I'm your host on this show, I'm the founder here at whistlekick and I get to spend all day, every day working on things for traditional martial arts; whether those be products or content and you can find everything we do at whistlekick.com. There's a store there and if you pop into the store, you can find all the things that we make and if you use the code, PODCAST15, that's going to get you 15% off every single product with a whistlekick logo on it. If you want to find out more about this or any other episode on this show, go to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. We bring you 2 new shows every single week, all for free with the goal of connecting, educating and entertaining traditional martial artists around the world. Today's subject came as the result of an email, a question, that our listeners, TJ Jones, posed to me. He was struggling trying to understand some things so I reached out to Mr. Jones and said hey, why don't you come on this show? Let's talk about this together, maybe it will benefit others. We had a good chat. I hope you enjoy it so let's do this. Mr. Jones, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

#### TJ Jones:

Hi, Mr. Lesniak. I am excited to be part of this. This is going to be fun.

#### Jeremy Lesniak:



Hey, I'm happy to have you here and listeners, we're slowly building up these Thursday episodes where somebody comes and asks a question which is a heck of a lot of fun for me because, well, 1) I don't have to do any research or anything and 2) It gives me opportunity to engage with somebody on a subject to really just unpack it, martial arts-wise, which I'm sure you all know I love to do and you wrote in with a question.

# TJ Jones:

I did!

# Jeremy Lesniak:

And I don't even know if you were planning on it coming this far and becoming something for the show so thanks! Thanks for your willingness to do that.

# TJ Jones:

I had hoped to get some feedback from you just because you have, I don't want if you want to hear this or not, but you have quite a bit of input in my, I guess, worldview of martial arts training just because of the podcast and being able to listen to the different people you bring on and your experience because you've listened and discussed things with so many people so I was really looking forward to getting your feedback and if we can, maybe, help some other martial artists who are in the same boat or who have experienced the similar situation then I'm glad to be of help for them.

# Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah and this is a topic that I think just about every day who've been training, we'll say, 4 or 5 years or more has probably considered so, instead of us burying the lead on this more, what was the question? What was it you wanted to talk about?

# TJ Jones:

I'm kind of in a quandary right now. I've been training since I was 14 off and on, different schools, different arts but what I kind of decided to do now is try to advance in belt ranks. I've had my first degree for some time and I just, transferred to another school, also a taekwondo school so both taekwondo schools but 2 different lineages and went back and started training again and got a 2<sup>nd</sup> first degree from them, from this other school so then, whenever I ask then, ok, look, I want to start advancing towards my 2<sup>nd</sup> degree and continuing to move up, do you guys have a curriculum sheet, do you have something that you can give me to kind of tell me what I need to be working on and one of the instructors were well, you have to know these 3 forms but other than that, it's kind of up to you and I was like wait a second, what? He continued to explain and he said it's going to be more like you decide where you want to take your training whether it be in self-defense, more practical stuff or do you want to do more demo stuff or breaking or weapons. You kind of have to decide what direction you want to



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go and then, we will test you based on the skills that you gain in that area, I guess. I'm not really sure how the testing looks at that point but that's kind of what he said and so I'm like, interesting, and it's not...I kind of feel like this was the case with my first school as well and one of the reasons that I didn't go back and continue training with them after I left to go to college was that there didn't seem to be a path forward after you reach your first degree so having seen it in 2 schools and I've heard of it in at least one other school, I was kind of like hmmm, I wonder if this is a common thing and maybe something that other people are struggling with.

# Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah and I don't know if I'm going to go so far as to say it's common but it's certainly not uncommon because, as you said with your situation, there are a few forms that you have to learn but you've probably learned all of the basic techniques and the majority of that curriculum outside the forms, in fact, I know plenty of schools where all of the forms are taught ahead of black belt where even a 1st degree black belt is simply showing refinement and it becomes that vague kind of fuzzy line progress that we're talking about here. I've experienced it in different ways. I've been part of schools that have, an almost militant curriculum, where there were new movements, new techniques, all the way up through into 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> degree black belts and then I've been with other schools where the forms, there are minimum forms that you have to know but sometimes, if you're really into forms, and this was me, you might learn several of them ahead of time. I think when I tested for my blackbelt, there wasn't anything that I hadn't known form-wise for 4 years at that point so it really becomes very individualized and I think that the further away you get from white belt, the more open it becomes and I don't know if that's accidental or by design but regardless of the systems I'm thinking of, it does tend to be pretty broad as you get further along. I mean, look at it this way: can you imagine an 8<sup>th</sup> degree black belt in some 10-belt system where they're going through and they're learning some new technique? They're working on things. They're learning, they're getting better but I think for the majority of us, if you consider that situation, there's something that seems a little odd about it. Maybe it does happen. I mean, there's probably some school out there that does especially with school that promote people very, very rapidly but to each their own.

# TJ Jones:

Yeah, and I guess, I know that in some schools, they have you create your own form for your 2<sup>nd</sup> degree. They expect you to be able to have that creativity and so, I'm okay with that but, on the other hand, the martial arts are so deep that it's like looking into a well and trying to pick out a single drop of water to study. You know what I mean? I can study breaking or I can study pressure point theory or I can study teaching or demonstration style, performance stuff or I can do the sparring competitions. There's just this massive repository of knowledge and you're kind of standing in a treasure trove and going what do I pick up first?

#### Jeremy Lesniak:



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And the irony is the more time you spend in your training, the higher you progress, the more that you realize there is out there and one of the saddest moments in my life is when I realized, no matter how much time I spent training, no matter how good I got, no matter how many instructors I had and schools I trained in, I wasn't going to know anywhere close to all of it. I will die one day having barely scratched the surface of what is available to me as a martial artist and as someone who loves knowledge and loves to share knowledge and just get better at these things that I'm passionate about, that was pretty depressing.

# TJ Jones:

Yeah, I can understand that. for me, I guess it's a little different for me and that exciting to me just because there is so much and to be honest, I have to blame you because I didn't realize how much there was until I started listening to your podcast, I guess it was, 2 and a half years ago, I started listening to your podcast and of course, by then, you had like a hundred episodes or something. I just [00:08:56] to the whole thing and then, once I finally got caught up, I stay caught up with you pretty much. I think there's a few episodes that I haven't finished just because I was busy with something and never went back and finished it but for the most part, I've listened to pretty much all of them and because of that, I had this whole, huge, oh, I can go train with this person. I can be able to study this thing and so it's exciting but also like, ah! I don't know where to go!

# Jeremy Lesniak:

Right, right and so, it becomes, I'm hearing my high school debate coach in my ear, in a sense, when you look at something like this, it comes down to a question of value and what is most valuable to you. If the school is offering you these very open parameters to just get better at something, to progress in some way that, I suspect, they want it to be something that matters to you, some sort of resonance in there then you have a near-infinite number of ways to proceed so the one that makes the most sense to figure out what is going to be most valuable to you and I think that there are 2 main ways that you can look at that. you can look at it from what am I going to enjoy the most or what is going to help me progress the most? The enjoyment is likely the thing that you're already the best at or the other side of it, the thing that's going to help you progress the most is the thing that you're the worst at.

# TJ Jones:

An interesting way to look at that. I don't think I would've, I mean, I guess, I know to focus on the things that are hard for you but I wouldn't've necessarily looking into that decision that way.

# Jeremy Lesniak:

If we think about martial arts as being all interrelated, so let's take forms and basics and breaking and sparring and let's throw in even tricking. Let's throw all those in there as potential options and there's still even so much within all of those. If you worked on making your punches stronger, faster, more



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powerful, that's going to translate into everything else. If the thing you're having the hardest time is, let's say, having strong, stable stances, the more you work on those, the more it's going to affect everything else and not equally, of course, but if you really hone in on the fact that everything we do in martial arts is connected to everything we do in martial arts; you can't help but move the ball forward on everything when you pick something that's kind of core and fundamental or something that is lacking because, as you work on that, you're working on all the various sub-elements of that thing.

# TJ Jones:

Yeah, I can see that. I can definitely see that working on individual thing, it's funny. There's 2 separate theories that's kind of coming out now and it seems like a lot of, I don't want to say younger generation martial artists, but kind of the mid-range, middle-age group, they're kind of switching from 4,000 punches and it will make everything else better to more of hey, let's spend time focusing on an applicable technique. Going back to the bunkai and saying let's not do that form 10,000 times until you know what it means; whereas, you just do the form 10,000 times and then, learn what it meant which is, I guess, is kind of a pendulum because looking at the history and whatnot, I listen to lain Abernathy and some of those guys and they say it used to be exactly the opposite you would learn the application and put it into this form and that's where the form came from so it's an interesting pendulum that's kind of swinging back and forth so, in a way, I guess we get caught between do we spend the time on repetition or on focusing on one little thing or do we go and try to improve our broader range like if I wanted to improve my competition, I would spend most of my time doing sparring drills and doing the poomsae or the kata but then, if I want to improve my applicable skills, then I would maybe go train with someone who's really good at reality-based self-defense or do I just kind of keep doing all of it and take maybe a slower growth path but a broader spectrum?

# Jeremy Lesniak:

And I think the most important thing to realize is there is no wrong answer. One of the things that I've come to realize, I get invited to teach at seminars and a number of these groups where there will be a bunch of different people teaching and everybody's got their specialty. There's so many teaching flexibility. I'm pretty flexible but I'm not as flexible as that person or sparring and I'm a decent point fighter and I can coach people through pretty well but I'm certainly not great. I'm pretty good at forms and I can coach people pretty well at forms but I'm not going to get out there and teach somebody one of my forms. That doesn't really make sense and so, that turns into what is the thing that I bring forward that I'm really good at? It took me some time to accept the fact that there isn't anything but that is the thing I'm really good at is that I'm very broadly based and what's that meant over the last few years is whistlekick's created a number of these opportunities is that there's always something I've been able to pull out of my back pocket that has been new or, at least, I was able to share in a way that people learned everywhere I've gone. Couple weeks ago I was pulling some Filipino martial arts stuff out of my back pocket working with a group that had trained almost exclusively with traditional karate and I'm around people that have been training for 50, 60 years. Some absolutely wonderful martial artists



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but well, here's this little thing and everybody's eyes just kind of lit up and I went oh, ok and I've had a number of those situations pop up and it feels really nice to be able to say well, I've at least dabbled if not done more than dabbling in a lot of different things and you start to see, again, how it karate better and then the next time I go in, I'm training in a taekwondo class, I have an epiphany about how some of that relates so I'm not saying that you have to or even should take that, you called it a slower approach of being kind of multi-functional but it's an option and it's not a bad one.

# TJ Jones:

That resonates with me a lot because I'm kind of like you. I'm not super talented at any one thing. I've never been this super flexible guy, or even in non-martial arts realms, I've never been super good at one thing but I know a little bit about a lot of things and I'm good at making the connections between them so maybe, rather than thinking of I need to focus on this one thing, maybe I just pick something knowing that that's going to add with my tool bag and, like you said earlier, it's going to start to improve these other areas as I make those connections and eventually be able to help others make similar connections as well.

# Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, of course, if part of this whole equation is that people overseeing at your school want to see something that they're not defining for you, it would be prudent to take a step back kind of outside of yourself, if possible, and say what are they observing? What are they seeing in maybe that maybe it's lacking? What's at least one thing I can work on that they're going to observe and say ah, he's definitely putting in the time. He's definitely finding his own path.

# TJ Jones:

That's a really good point. I'm actually writing that down. That's a good self-reflection question and there are 3 instructors at this school and I think I might be able to go to each one of them individually and say hey, what's something that you see that I can be better at or that you see that I lack of knowledge that I need. If 2 out of 3 of them say the same thing or all three of them say the same thing, then obviously I've got a pretty good direction to go in at that point.

# Jeremy Lesniak:

And they may give you that information but if they're like a majority of martial arts instructors I've known, they're not going to want to answer that question. What they would likely be happier answering is you presenting a very short plan. This is the thing that I think I need the most work on. I want to balance that out by working on this other thing that yes, I'm better at it but I really enjoy and these 2 things are going to be the focus of my self-training, my solo training over the next few months. Do you think this is a sensible plan?

# TJ Jones:



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Ok, so kind of coming to them with a, instead of expecting them to layout the motivation, be the motivation and let them guide your direction a little bit?

## Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah and when you present them to them, watch their face. Not so much what they say but their face. That's going to tell you whether or not they agree with your assessment because here's the thing, the longer you spend in the martial arts, the more likely an instructor is to let you figure stuff out for yourself because the more time you put in learning the lesson, the more value the lesson is, the more you're going to remember it. We don't tend to remember things that people do for us, we don't take as much value from those so I can see, depending on the instructor, they may say oh, he may say he's really terrible at stances when over here, it's his, all his punches are terrible. He couldn't punch through a wet paper bag but he'll figure it out eventually. I don't mind if he works on his stances, yeah, sure, go for it. the other group of people you might ask if you have anyone of similar rank, someone who's not an instructor because they're the ones probably mixing it up with you when you're sparring, when you're doing drills, when you're together there. They know you well. They're the ones you're probably trading shots with so their opinion isn't bad either.

### TJ Jones:

That's a good idea. I'm somewhat limited in that area because of the way I had, a little bit of a background, I actually have my own small school I teach at and I do either private lessons or when I'm not teaching, I run over and catch a class at this other school and so, most of my training is either just with an instructor or during a test so I don't have a huge amount of interaction with other martial artists of my rank but I have a little bit so that's definitely something, next time I make it over there for a class, maybe I can get some input from some of the guys there. I say guys, they're guys and girls but maybe get some input from some of the students there as well.

#### Jeremy Lesniak:

I didn't know you have your own school.

#### **TJ Jones:**

I do.

#### Jeremy Lesniak:

That's cool. My suspicion then, kind of similar, the things you teach the most are the things that you're the best at. The things that you avoid teaching, the things that you're not. That's what I see time and again when I visit schools, when I travel around.

#### **TJ Jones:**



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And I can definitely tell you that's true because I know there are areas that I'm like, somebody will say oh, we want to learn this and I'm like work on this first because I hate to go study that before I take the team.

## Jeremy Lesniak:

Do you mind sharing some of those?

## TJ Jones:

Weapons are huge. Most of my students are fairly low-ranked. I hadn't been open that long but I was talking to them about things that they would want to see added to the school eventually and kind of just was going through a list and whenever I say weapons, all of their eyes lit up and I was like oh, maybe, I shouldn't have said that because now I got to go do it. Not that I mind it, I really enjoy weapons training but it's not one that I had a lot of experience with so yeah, I can definitely see where the areas that I'm weak in to be, the areas that I maybe need to focus on more and I guess that's just another part of my quandary is that when you're running a school, as a commercial venture, you have to kind of look at what your students want and they go out and get it but I don't want to spend time going out and spending on something that isn't going to be the highest possible benefit to them so maybe if it worked for me but not for them.

#### Jeremy Lesniak:

If it benefits you, it benefits them.

#### TJ Jones:

Ok, how so?

#### Jeremy Lesniak:

If you become a better martial artist, even if it's not going to, let's say the thing that you're most passionate about or the thing that you would end up doing would be breaking. Let's say you'd go out, you spend a bunch of time breaking, let's pretend your student base is weird and none of them like breaking, in my experience a good portion tend to like breaking but let's pretend nobody likes breaking and there are a couple ways that you would handle that, the same way you would handle anything else. You would likely have some element of that which is required and then, there are probably options for them to work on other things instead. If you have sparring in your school, you probably have people who don't enjoy sparring but they still spar and if your school was all sparring, then you would lose those people so either the curriculum dictates the student base or the student base dictates the curriculum. I think it makes more sense that you, as the instructor, are dictating the curriculum which then dictates the student base because, otherwise, if the people coming in, if that mix changes dramatically and you're trying to adapt to that, I think that's really hard to maintain.



# TJ Jones:

That's a good perspective. I wonder if there's a balance there between, I guess maybe as you get bigger as a school, it's a little bit easier to adapt, part of that by hiring another instructor that has skills in an area that your students are looking for but right now, it's just me so I guess, maybe I just need to focus on keeping the students that want what I have to offer and then developing skills that may improve that.

## Jeremy Lesniak:

If you're having fun and you're teaching them and they're learning and they're having fun, it almost doesn't matter what I'm teaching them. All the people, all the schools that I've seen where they're saying my students don't want to go learn other stuff, it's because they're having fun. I can't think of a single martial arts school I've been part of where I've been having fun and still learning things and I've said you know, I'm going to stop training here because it's fun and I'm learning things but I want to go have fun and learn different things over there. Maybe it happens once in a while. I don't think that that's generally the case. It's because people don't see the value and this is a radical we could really dig into. If we're going to do that, we're going to do that another time but I want to pull it back to weapons because I think you just found the magic Venn diagram intersection. Something your students have been asking for, something you enjoy and something you want to work on more. I don't think you're going to find too many things that check all these boxes.

#### TJ Jones:

Yeah, when you put it that way, it definitely comes together cleanly so that's definitely a direction that I can aim in and I guess that's kind of freeing in some ways because it eliminates a lot of other possible options and it also narrows your focus. I was listening with somebody the other day and they said clarity and focus are the 2 things we really need, not necessarily options.

#### Jeremy Lesniak:

One of my favorite drills when I work with mid-level ranks with sparring is I tell them, I start to restrict what they can use. Ok, no feet, now it's just hands and most of them get better and one of the most impressive, and then you say ok, just your left hand and you can have someone just using their left hand sparring against someone who's using both hands and both feet and they can usually do just fine because they don't have to worry about what hand do I block with? What hand do I punch with? They just have to go. Sometimes having options is not a good thing. Makes it more challenging.

#### **TJ Jones:**

Yeah, I've seen that as well in students. Particularly, when you get to green belt ranks and they start to learn some of the fancier kicks and they forget about the basics. They don't want to use them anymore even though that's what's practical and what works and they just trying to throw their spin hook kicks



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every time and end up getting kind of creamed because they're not paying attention to using the basics that they used to have to so yeah, but it's this drill. I've used that one for myself.

## Jeremy Lesniak:

Tell me about your weapons experience.

## TJ Jones:

I've had a little bit of stick fighting so I've had some of the creative stick fighting, actually. I first trained with a little bit of fencing but basically, it was looking at fencing moves in a book and taking a piece of bamboo and beating the crap out of my buddy and I really enjoyed that and then, my mom wouldn't let me purchase martial arts lessons so I wasn't able to train with any traditional weaponry for a long time and then, eventually, in college, I had a buddy, well before that I was training, for my first Dan, one of the requirements was that we learn a little bit of Gensato which is just kind of a different name for Kali, slightly different lineage and short stick fighting and we learned a bit of that but there wasn't very much of it. It was one of those deals where we had another person there who wasn't the primary instructor but have had experience in that so every few months we would have a class and learn a few things but then, I went to college and I had a buddy there who was very much into western sword fighting and so we would build a homemade shinai and go out at night where people couldn't laugh at us and beat the crap out of each other and that was very enjoyable so mostly, blunt instrument training and I really enjoyed the short stick work. It just comes to hand very naturally for me.

#### Jeremy Lesniak:

And I think that there's something there. I think, if you were to review, refresh and develop a simple curriculum that maybe paired, I don't know if you have a formalized curriculum in your school but a simple curriculum that could start, maybe not Day One with your students but start fairly early and progress them up through, maybe add a 2<sup>nd</sup> stick at some point, maybe add bow. If you know how to use a single stick, you can translate that work to a lot of things. Basically any of your single-handed weapons. Obviously not bows because they're not a single-handed weapon but a knife, a short sword. Those principles from one weapon tend to translate to other weapons and I bet if you start digging in, there's more than enough there to keep you busy and if you're looking for help with specific weapons, there are probably people not too far from you that can help you with certain ones and if there's something you want to learn and you don't have anybody nearby, you can certainly reach out to me. I can connect you with people if it's a weapon I don't know.

# TJ Jones:

Awesome! I think the beauty of martial arts now is that you don't have to go very far to find what you want because it's not like it's used to be back in the '60s and '70s when you had to travel 2 and a half hours to find a good school. They're fairly high quality schools everywhere these days so I know that



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there are some good kali schools here in the area so I may end up kind of spending some Saturdays over there and starting to develop those skills.

## Jeremy Lesniak:

And a lot of schools, if you tell them, look, this is a hole in my game and I want to get better at it and yeah, I have a school and yeah, I'm going to teach some of these stuff. I think a lot of instructors are going to say oh, cool. Well, let me help you develop that curriculum, let's see how that fits in with what you're teaching. Are there going to be some instructors that get bent out of shape about that? Yeah but that's not the school for you.

## TJ Jones:

The school that I've been attending has been supportive in that. I've talked to them about different parts of the curriculum and whatnot, this and that in the empty-hand stuff. oh, you can improve that here and oh, that looks really good. I'm glad your students are doing that. We actually had a little inter-school tournament, I guess it was 3 or 4 months ago and it was just kind of a fun thing. It was just a benefit tournament for Saint Jude or somewhere like that and they really seemed to be fairly impressed by what my students were doing but they also gave some good suggestions so I've been grateful for their willingness to be open about that and not be as worried about the competition side between the two schools as far as competing. For students, they're more willing to just help and encourage the martial arts community in the area.

#### Jeremy Lesniak:

So, what do you think? Do you think this answers the question? Gives you a place to go?

#### TJ Jones:

I think it does. I think, once we kind of took all of the information and put it together, looking at weapons, where it's just going to be a pretty good direction to go in and the good thing is I'm looking forward to that. I enjoy weapons work and it is a weak point so it's good that those 2 questions you asked earlier, what am I going to enjoy the most and what needs the most work? They're kind of both the same thing so putting those together with weapons would definitely help me to focus everything together.

#### Jeremy Lesniak:

I hope we keep in touch and make sure you let us know what's going on. Maybe we can do a follow up on this at some point and let everybody know how it went.

# TJ Jones:

I will do that for sure. Thank you for being able to talk through it with me and help me find some clarity.



### Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm having a really good time with these conversational question sort of episodes but it takes a special guest. It takes someone who's willing to trust, who's willing to be open and have really honest conversation. Well, I thought Mr. Jones was incredibly open and I really thank him for his trust so, Sir, thank you for listening. Thanks for coming on this show and I hope to talk with you again soon. If you have a question, if there's something you'd like my help with, reach out. I can't help everybody. These inquiries are becoming more and more frequent and we can't do them in every episode but I can do my best to help you regardless if it becomes an episode so if you want to email me,

jeremy@whistlekick.com. our social media, @whistlekick, everywhere you can think of and of course, if you want to show your support for the things that we're doing here, make a purchase. Maybe over to Amazon or whistlekick.com and our whistlekick.com discount code is PODCAST15. If you'd like to suggest a guest for our Monday episode, there's a form at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com for you to do just that. Thank you for listening, thank you for your support and until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!