



Episode 454 – Sifu Steven Macramalla | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Thanks for coming by! This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 454. Today, my guest is Sifu Steven Macramalla. I'm Jeremy Lesniak. The founder of whistlekick, host for martial arts radio, just a guy who really loves training and that kind of grew and well, look at where we are now. We're doing this show twice a week. We've got a ton of stuff going on and it's all in support of traditional martial arts. In fact, that's the goal for this show: to educate, inspire, connect traditional martial artists all across the globe and we do that in a number of ways. This show twice a week, [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com), you can find out everything we got going on with this show. Transcripts, videos, photos, links. Listen to any episode we've ever done. [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com), that's our digital hub. Our online repository for every single project and product we're involved in and if you check out those products, use the code PODCAST15, get yourself 15% off and help support the show and all of our endeavors at whistlekick. Today's guest has a pretty cool story. He shares some pretty cool things and I'm not even going to pretend that I'm going to do disservice to summarize it here before we get into the show so instead of falling down on my face in some half-hearted attempt to do it, I'm just going to let him do it. Sifu Macramalla, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

**Steven Macramalla:**

Thank you very much! It's a pleasure and an honor to be here.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Hey, the honor's mine. Thanks for coming on. We're talking, I mean, it's on the early side of my day but it's a very early time of your day if I'm doing time zone math rightly.

**Steven Macramalla:**

It's a lovely, balmy 6 AM here in Santa Cruz, California.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'm sure it's far balmier there than it is here.

**Steven Macramalla:**

I don't actually know where you are. Where are you exactly?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'm in Vermont.

**Steven Macramalla:**

You're in Vermont? Ah, so you have lovely snow in the ground, yes, already?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Not yet. Knock on wood. It's supposed to happen this week but we've been seeing some pretty hard frost and waking up to 25, 30 degrees.

**Steven Macramalla:**

Most cold is in the morning. I want to say that I really appreciate what work you guys do. You do an excellent job having a conversation about martial arts that opens up martial arts, opens up the facets, doesn't make it just about the conversation when you talk about martial arts to other people who don't know anything about it is they think it's about fighting, brutality, just straight up violence or it's the territory where trolls go to visit and they just like tear everything down. Oh, this is not practical with relish. You just take the conversation away from that and you open it up to all the facets of what martial arts have to offer and it's a much needed conversation. It's great for everybody and it helps a tremendous deal so thank you for the work that you do. I wanted to say that right off the bat.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, thank you and I think that that just comes from my personal, I guess, love of the martial arts and the realization that the martial arts can be and is so many different things to so many different people and instead of trying to niche down within martial arts to say within martial arts is to me or what it has



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to be or should be which those statements drive me insane just to celebrate the fact that martial arts really can and is be so many things. The grammar on that sentence was terrible but I think we know where this was going. It's like saying music. How many different kinds of music? It's like saying I love music or I practice music. I mean, there are a lot of ways that you can take that just as is with martial arts as music, or sports or words.

**Steven Macramalla:**

Yeah, I think for people who are martial arts teachers or longtime practitioners or have been exposed to very deep practice, it's not a surprise but to hear that the way that I approach it or a lot will approach it is martial arts is life art like my teacher used to say and he would talk about how, in older times, if there was a training of a school of some kind, you learned how to defend yourself but you also learned, also how to heal and also some other art whether it was calligraphy or painting or cooking or some form or the highest of the art, meditation so it was a way of approaching all of life and, this is not just an Eastern concept, it's kind of the theory, the philosophy behind the word gymnasium from Ancient Greece. It was that the gym was a place where you went to develop body, art and mind and it's just like an old instinct to bring everything together into one place to develop not just a style or a technique but a person, an ethics, the culture and that's the higher function of what it is to be a human being and a higher function of what this thing is: martial art and so, I come to it from that perspective and I just want to say to listeners out there, yes, I'm a martial artist, I'm a martial arts teacher, I'm a Sifu. Yes, there's a lot of people out there who could take me. I'm not a killer. That's not how I approach things. I can take care of myself, sure. I'd be fine. I'd be okay but, in a lot of different kind of circumstances but if this is like an out and out pat me on the shoulder, I turn around, you tap the ground 3 times like waiting for me to react like Bruce Lee and get into a sparring match, yeah, I'd probably wouldn't be walking home but what I'm very good at is opening up people to a journey that they can embark on through movement that opens them up to different aspects of themselves to different aspects of their psyche through movement, through breath and through the archetypes of the system that I teach and that is my life's work. It's my life's work. It's my life's joy and it's been really transformative for a lot of people. So, that's where I come to marsh. That's where I'm coming from when I teach martial arts. The martial arts that I teach is called Chien-Lung. It's based on 6 animal archetypes and each of the animals represents different parts of the mind, different systems of the body and a different way of moving, of self-defense, martial arts style, of course, but they all have different personalities as well. They have very good food, music, clothing and a different approach to physical fitness as well as to internal work and self-development and so there's a whole cosmology to it as well as, of course, different energy. Eastern concepts of energy and so, what I do is that I help people embody different aspects of themselves. The idea is everybody possesses each of the animals with one or two that are stronger or more dominant and usually only parts of those so through the classes, they learn to embody the whole of themselves. How we do that? We do that by adopting the character of the animal and people roleplay. You listen to the music that the animal listens to, eat the food the animal eats and so on. You do the meditation practices and the movement practices and you pay attention to the things in the world that that animal archetype would



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pay attention to in the way that it would pay attention and people, it's a process of just asking yourself questions but there's a little bit of a structure. A little scaffolding around that that's bigger than any one question you ask and the process guides you from one process to the next and that's the real power of the system and what people discover about themselves helps them in every aspect of their lives from interpersonal relationships, to studies, school or the performance at work so that's the approach that we have here and that's what makes it a life art as well as a martial art so that's it and yeah. There's a lot in it. Please, if you'd like to ask a question, go for it!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, I was just going to let you go. You're making my job easy. I want to go back to something. You said something that you admitted that I think a lot of martial artists admit, martial artists would admit privately but wouldn't admit publicly that is that you're not a fighter. There seems to be this, obviously, there's this outside myth. Non-martial artists think that the pinnacle of martial arts is being this amazing fighter because that's what's presented to them in TV and movies, in full contact events but we know that that's not the goal. Maybe for some, for some people maybe that's the goal but I think the vast majority, I don't know too many people who join a karate or taekwondo class and say, I'm here because I want to be the world's greatest fighter.

**Steven Macramalla:**

Right, yeah. At my response, diversity counts for so much. Diversity is really important whether you're talking about immigration to a country or different perspectives in a company or in a laboratory so I'm also a cognitive psychologist. I'm a professor. I lecture at a university. I teach cognition which is a science of how the mind processes information and generates the illusion of your reality. I teach that, depth perception, introductory psychology and it never ceases to astound me the different paths and journeys that people take through life, the particular strength that their perspectives, that their journeys imbue them with and so, the perspective that I bring to martial arts is very much like that of a research lab is that you don't all have to be Einstein. In fact, there are very few and far between of those kinds of really truly talented people who get all the ideas and understand all of the method so what does happen is that you get people with their own particular strength and you get a few of them together and when you get them working as a team, what they can do collectively far surpasses what any one individually can do and it's the same thing for movement. It's the same thing for martial art. Yeah, sure, you can get Georges St-Pierre or the big fighters in MMA, Baz Ruten, very talented, very powerful but they also made it there because they had support of the team and each of them brought in their own experience and their own talents to there and that keys to the conversation is missing very often at the frontline of martial art teaching. You want to know what wins a fight? Discipline. I mean, throughout the history of war, discipline is the most important weapon. Just talk to the, just look at Roman history. It wasn't like the Romans were bigger or tougher. It wasn't that they had the better weapons or were meaner, it's just that they stayed in the phalanx and kept their line and they followed orders and so there's that. You lose a lot if your blinders are only for that sort of, well, frankly, psychologically, immature warrior attitude,





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yes, but psychologically immature one. I think that's an important element to the conversation is what are the individual talents that a person is bringing, what part of them are they cultivating and how much harder are, not much harder but are they trying to improve themselves today compared to yesterday and if that's the conversation we can have I think there's a lot more, I think practice can be better and I think access to teachers would also improve and it would cultivate a better culture. I think that's an important issue all together. You have a podcast and yes, you are speaking to martial artists and of course, you got to keep that focus but as a culture, what are we practicing for? That's a bigger question that we collectively have to ask ourselves. We do our practice for ourselves, yes. It's incredibly rewarding, absolutely. The outside society, we ask, what can we give back or at the very least, how can I get it out there more? It's not by infomercials. It's by what do we have to offer to society. What are the things that everybody in society is kind of wrestling with that we may have some insight and we may have something to say about and today, we are living in interesting times. There's a political and environmental, if you're not thinking about it and somehow you're not incorporating martial arts, you're kind of missing the point of your own life in a way. That's a bit harsh but you're kind of missing an opportunity. An opportunity to get involved in the dialogue and that's one of the things that I love about the martial arts that I teach is that there's, you have these archetypal animals and they have ways of engaging. One, with themselves, of course, but also with other people and with the environment, with nature and each of the animals represent different aspect of the earth and it's not unique to this martial arts but it's really explicit about it where part of the practice of nature but also, when you do the movement, incorporating visualizations about the elements into movement and when doing meditation or the energy work that you're going kind of work, visualization about the element figure very prominently. Drawing energy from specific parts of the earth that relate to different systems of the body and also 2 different facets of the mind and the form of consciousness that that aspect of the mind represent so, for example, I should probably talk a little bit about the animals. So, there's 3 cats and 3 snakes and there's, let say, there's tiger, black panther, light leopard and there's python, there's cobra, there's boa and so, let's say, take for example, tiger. Tiger represents the musculature of the body. It's physical power. The energetic centers, the physical centers, [00:17:36] whatever system you want to call it. The heart, the middle [00:17:43], the frontal lobes, analytical mind and this animal's about the aspect of consciousness of intact will power and it's the muscles. It's not just any muscles but especially big prime movers. The shoulders, the delts, the glutes. Big lash of the body, these big prime movers, you call them muscle mirrors in bodybuilding and in martial arts, they act as, sometimes you use them as body armor. It's the body armor part of the body and the tiger resonates with the armor, if you will, of the earth; the mantle crust of the earth and so, each of the animal has a bao. A basic, breathe in, breath out while you move your hands and your feet in a particular way and with tiger, it's incredibly fierce, the [00:18:40] kind of style of breathing where it's very high resistance, tension breaths. Like blowing air through, running a jet engine in a mason jar; that's what it sounds like. It's a very intense breathing and while you're doing the breathing, you're drawing energy, you're visualizing energy coming in from the mantle of the earth coming into the musculature and you're using that sense of the plate and their friction against each other just to embody the fierce concentration of the tiger's analytical mind so that's



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how this art works. It connects the person, individual, to their physical body, through their psyche but also to the planet and the environment and it's one of the ways, that's how this art works and it's one way that all art have of connecting an individual to a larger context. So, it's not just about strengthening but it's also about riding a purpose for a higher goal to the training and this is a lot, I know, but what I've done is I've written a book all about all this and it's called *Unleash the Dragon within* and it just came out in August and it's available in Amazon and bookstores and as I go into more detail on that, it's all laid out but what I talk about in the book is that what every martial art has, whether you know it or now, every martial art has, what I call, a mythos, a logos and a morphos and with every martial arts has a myth, technique and has something, a practice, that helps you integrate the result of going through a conflict. Every martial art, whether you're a street fighter, you're MMA, you're Tai Chi. It doesn't matter. There are these 3 component and if you don't think you have one, that's part of it. That's part of yours but they are all there. The story of conflict has this sort of 3 parts. You have the myth. There's some sort of background worldview that you learn whether you think of this as terms of engagement if you're in the US military or we fight or we do what we do to defend the constitution. That's their myth. If you're into Chinese martial arts, there's an entire cosmology about how the one becomes the two becomes the 3, becomes the ten thousand, the yin and yang, the 5 elements coming together. If you're in Aikido, I'm a 2<sup>nd</sup> degree black belt in Aikido, it's about finding harmony with the spiritual and divine forces and harmonizing with them. If you're in MMA, there's an ethos. There is a warrior culture of humility and developing yourself and becoming the best that you can and if you're a streetfighter, man, I'm used to doing what I got to do to survive, yeah, that's yours. That's their mythos. That's the world that they're coming from and they don't, of course, we have this lovely word in psychology; all of this is implicit. For some people, it's implicit. If you don't think you have one, think again. You're walking around with it. You just don't know it and then, that worldview translate into the technique and then, forms the technique. With, I'll say the US military, that logic of we have this very specific purpose and so, when we go about doing anything, we analyze the cost and the benefit. What are the tradeoffs? Is it logistically feasible? Does it fit legally? There's this incredibly important constitutional integrity. With the Chinese method, they're inspired by nature. They look at the different elements represent different qualities, different wavelengths and wave qualities of movements. All these different textures and attributes from relaxation to explosiveness, timing and balance and their techniques reflect that motion of wave-like dynamics. With aikido, there's a spiraling harmony that's inspired by natural movement in the world and in the cosmos and with MMA, it's straight up techniques. No fuss, no muss and no extra flourishes and with street fighting, you do what you got to do to survive. It encompasses everything from trickery to spring-like, coil-like action and no nonsense kind of moves and then there's the morphos. The transformation because the most important part of the fight is what happens afterwards and we don't talk about that but we don't go through a conflict untouched. You can be unscathed but you're not going to be unchanged and you need to integrate that experience into a tapestry, into a narrative that fits in the rest of your life and that elevates you and whatever cause it is that you've been fighting for and usually, society around you. There's a process of transformation and everybody has a different way of transforming and I guess it's just kind of fun and we just take this for granted but people who've gone



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through a conflict somehow has to integrate that story of conflict back into their lives. That's the process of transformation and there are different ways of doing that. As a psychologist, I can speak to that from a psychological point of view and what's nice is that the animals capture the diversity that people have of approaching their own healing work or their own integrative work and so, perfect for going back with tiger. Tiger is about willpower and it's very simple, straightforward and linear. The tiger operates from a very strong sense of integrity and what it does, what it tries to do when it integrates experiences is that it tries to, it aligns itself with things of power. As it goes through the journey of its life, it develops its personal fence of willpower. It's always been based on tiger's own ego but as it gets more mature, it realizes that that its own power is based on things that support it so society, family, the planet, nature and it starts to build, not just a body, a heart and a mind but a building, an institution, a community, an organization that is founded on those same principles and it uses the principles of its own physical development and practice as guiding principles in the community. You always meet these people. They've turned their, a lot of white people go into the martial arts is that they find how you grow a body is how you grow a family. How you develop and cultivate the discipline that's required to maintain a practice is also the same kind of discipline that's needed to pursue a career or a project. Their own practice becomes a metaphor for integrating their life together in one cohesive whole. That is just one example and yeah, again, same thing. With every approach to martial arts, they have different ways of that morphos stage so with, the military, take care of your vets. Get them treated. We don't leave a man behind. We do that in the marines and we do that as a society. No, there shouldn't be people homeless on the street. We don't leave a man behind. If you're in like Chinese, and in Chinese martial arts, they have an incredibly rich medical practice partially so they can help fix up their training partners so they can continue training but also, so that the idea being that if you cause damage, you should be able to fix it. It's a higher level of practice. With Aikido, there's a Shinto practice, devotional chanting and purification. Just like any religion, you have a, mea culpa, this is a bit strong, but you have some way of making atonement and seeking a higher meaning afterwards. MMA, not to speak too broadly or too big a brushstroke but there's what do you do after you've had your career. Maybe it's endorsements, maybe your career goes into teaching others and even in street fighting, maybe it's a bit nihilistic, you might have a nihilistic philosophy. Yes, dog eat dog. Whatever you can get, whatever angle you are. That's your way of integrating the story. That's your way of integrating the narrative into a larger context and it's not just martial arts that have this way of approaching their work. It's any field, really, and with martial arts, it's just really explicit. It's just there's something irrevocable and we respond to that on a very basic level and I guess I should just give examples because I'm a teacher and that's what I do compulsively but if you're a chef, there's that worldview, there's the technique and then, there's the integration. Your worldview is these are the ingredients, this is how they fit, this is our history. We live in this place, we were conquered by these people and we absorbed their culinary habits and this is how you cook it. We put the meal down on the table and we sing or we put the meal down on the table, we eat as quickly as we can and we leave. Whatever! It's like you integrate the meal is part of the larger context and it serves a bigger story. Musician, dancer, whatever it is, there's a view you're coming from. There are techniques that are an extension of that worldview and then, after the deed is done, the work



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is finished and you've gone. If you've been through any kind of conflict, where there is a tension of opposites, where there has been a struggle and you come out somewhat changed, you have to do the extra work as a human being of integrating, of recognizing that change. We do this automatically and that's the morphos part. That's the part of the transformation and you have to allow that change to occur and if you stop it, you try to stop it. If you try to go back to who you were before the conflict, before your trial, your odyssey, your challenge, it's not going to work. It's going to backfire, in fact, so you have to move forward with it and it's just that much more, I guess what I'm saying is this, it gets much that much more explicit in a physical conflict but it's no different. Conflict is conflict regardless if it's physical, psychological, social, political, economic, whatever it is.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I want to jump in if I may.

**Steven Macramalla:**

Please do.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Because you're connecting dots in a way that I'm over here nodding. I'm doing a lot of nodding and we certainly had folks on this show who have put forth some of what they're saying but I don't think we've ever had anyone and I've certainly never heard anyone talk about these things the way that you are. I want to go back. I want to roll way, way back because at some point, I mean, you've got the academic side, you've got the martial arts side and I'm going to guess the martial arts came first and you pursued the academics in, at least, part to understand some of the things you were exploring in the martial arts. Am I right there?

**Steven Macramalla:**

Yeah, broad enough stroke, yeah, sure.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Ok, would you mind talking about that piece? Maybe a survey of how you got started in martial arts but I'm really interested about the academic side of this and how you started to connect these dots because you're talking about the animals. You're talking about tiger in a way that I've not heard anyone talk about it and I'm fascinated.

**Steven Macramalla:**

Excellent! That's a good sign!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**





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I'm not asleep over here!

**Steven Macramalla:**

No, no, no, that's great, no. That's a think about. So, you want to know where the point of view came from?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's probably more a period of time. Let me say it in a different way. Let me ask this in a slightly different fashion. The majority of people who train martial arts hear what their instructors say, they internalize it, maybe they'll come to a slightly different interpretation of it and some of them will just continue to practice in that way without understanding. A few of them will pass it on, more or less verbatim, with their own students but once in a while, you get someone who, as I say, advances martial arts. Someone who takes the things that they've learned and they become hellbent on understanding it at a deeper level, in a different way. They are training in different martial arts, maybe they're pursuing academics that will help them understand it and it sounds like you are one of those knowledge seekers, those advancers and at some point, some light bulb went on for you somewhere to say there's more and I want to know what it is.

**Steven Macramalla:**

Yeah, personal effect. It's a lovely reflection, thank you. Yeah, I'm not normal.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Unsurprising!

**Steven Macramalla:**

I'm a little bit different, what can I say? Again, diversity and talking about neurodiversity. Everybody brings a different perspective and there's no accounting for taste. And that's the big question of this art is who are you? What are you? What are you bringing? Where are you going to be moving to? Where are you moving from and where are you moving to? Those are all the big fundamental questions and that is what my teacher excelled at. He was, I could not possibly untangle of all the things I talked about. I did take them a little bit. I did extend them, I explored them, I filled them in and so on but by God, it was because we had one hell of a teacher who was like a great example of the kind of exploration that he was talking about and it was just relentless and we just sucked it in by osmosis and his name was Constantine Darling and he grew up in New York. He picked up all sorts, the way that he tells the story and I talk about it in the book. He grew up with the name Connelly Darling and he liked dance and so, he'd go to ballet school with his dance slippers and he lived in Harlem, sorry, Queens in New York. He'd be going to dance classes with his dance shoes and he'd be getting into fights like ah, Connie Darling? And so, he had to fight and at one point, he came home bloody after some kid had beaten him up and



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his father took him to it. Hit him around and you don't come back to the house until you got the blood of the kid who did this on your fist. He went out, went and did it and he came back and that started his interest in martial arts and he got into a lot of the different ones and he came along this one, this art, Chien-lung and then, Vietnam happened. He became a conscious objector and he realized that he wasn't going to want to kill anybody that hasn't done anything to him like Muhammad Ali kind of thing and all sorts of things happen. He got court martialled, on the way to the brig, the one only friend that he had left was the guy driving the truck, drove it into a ditch or took some last exit before the military prison and on to an airport and tell him get out of the country, just leave so he came to Canada, opened up dance studios and dance companies and made his way out to Victoria, British Columbia. I met him in Montreal and I went to train with him in Victoria, British Columbia and the martial art that he taught, Chien-lung, became this sort of like coatrack, if you will, where he could hang all these other ideas about spiritual and personal development and he was larger than life. The second day, I met him at an improv workshop, a dear friend and still my teacher, Barbara Podmiller, in improvisation had called me up and invited me to a workshop and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the workshop, she reminded one of the other participants of a dream she had had the night before. This was stuff he was doing all the time. It was just ridiculous. People had all of these kinds of stories seeing him alter, like shapeshift, basically, or know stuff that he had no business knowing. Things like that and I was young and I was inspired by that beyond, I was mystified, intrigued, I was hooked. I remembered during these workshops and he talked about the animal sense. These 3 animals. There's 3 cats, 3 snakes. The cats are masculine, the snakes are feminine. You marry a cat, you marry and integrate a cat with a snake, you create a dragon and the dragon says yes to all of life and that was it. I was hooked and it was this archetypal power that just reached in and pulled on the strings of my imagination and my intellect and I guess, you can understand. You're asking the question how did I get into this, what pushed me on this journey? It was the pain of my own personal upbringing. I had a childhood that was eventful. That had its own stresses and in the martial art, I found a vehicle that could help me make up for some lost opportunities of growing in certain ways, physically, mentally and emotionally and yeah, I've got a brain and so I need something that had some legs on it to get me mind some exercise. Something with imagination as well as with structure or logic to it. I just got hooked hook, line and sinker and other pieces of the puzzle. Yeah, sure. My father was a surgeon so the focus on the physical body from the point of view of different systems just came to naturally fit and made sense. Things like that and what else can I say about this? Yeah, that's the personal background that I was coming with.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

How long did it take you to realize that your exposure to this individual was not typical?

**Steven Macramalla:**

I was pretty damn young as my reference point. It's one of those things. It's not an uncommon story. You talk to any person who's had a really strong mentor, you don't know. That's the beauty, right? Of youth is that you don't know and it becomes your origin story, right? Con used to call it your entry point



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but there's a whole bunch of sociological, psychological, interpersonal dynamics that are all bundled together like some sort of Frodo kind of way and you can't untangle it. You're not supposed to untangle it. It's supposed to all be one big blob and I suppose, as you move, it starts to take shape. Yeah, I didn't appreciate. I don't think I really knew until 10, 12, 15 years later I could really appreciate it. When I went back to school, when I went back to college, that was the beginning of appreciating much more what I'd gone through. What would happen, Connie was like, I think he was incredibly foresightful. There was something to his practice that he seem to talk about things in the '90s and then, we would find in research in the aught years, in the 2000-mid years, early years. Things through research that would pan out and how the hell did you know this? That was going on all the time but then, as I was taking my, getting my degree in psychology, I'd encounter different theories and school of thoughts. You're Freudian, you're humanistic, you're Jungian, you're social, construct and all that and at every turn, that's what Connie was talking about. Oh, that's what he was talking about. Oh, that's what he was talking about and there was, that kind of, it's hard to explain this but he wasn't just a fighter, physical fighter, he was also an intellectually engaged individual and that's just an important part, much as an important part in your training as the pushups. You have to read, you have to be exposed to new ideas and new perspectives. They will inform your training at every level, at every turn. It's not rumination. Don't get stuck in your head but keep your imagination alive. Keep your imagination enthralled. Keep asking what about this? What if? And that's what he excelled at and so, I got to see that in a structured way and in a very informed way in college. We talk about college as being the repository of ideas, yes, but it's also a collective history of thinking and you get exposed. Hopefully, you have a good professor, you get exposed to all the previous mistakes as well and the stories of surrounding, making those mistakes and that gave me a structure and so I could tease apart ideas and results better from the process. So I could tease apart my own process from the results I got and that was an important step along the way and I think that's an important element. I think that's something people confuse very often like the goal with the process, the destination with the journey. Those are 2 very separate things and again, the animals become really cool metaphors for that. Again, with each of these animals, these are archetype and they are, we have this word from Jungian psychology called transgressive so they are symbols but they are not like math symbols where the symbol means one thing and one thing only. There are symbols that can be applied to many different things so, you can be a tiger-type of person. You can be doing a python kind of profession but you can be doing it in a leopard sort of manner. You can have somebody like Bruce Lee so Bruce Lee, really fantastic tiger physique but he's a white leopard personally. He is a little bit, yes, he has tremendous power but the speed was not a tiger speed. It was a leopard speed. The philosophical viewpoint they had about martial arts that he tried to communicate through Jeet Kune Do was a leopard kind of philosophy. That's an example and so, the animals become a really useful language to help a person be able to pull apart these different elements of their lives. What they are doing, how they are doing it and how does that jive with their true nature, with who they are as a person and that was all as a part of our practice. Another big part of our practice, the idea was to apply the animals, these archetypes to ourselves and so, what's my tiger? What's my panther? What's my cobra? What's my python? What's my boa and am I honest about it? the tiger represents will power.



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The panther represents instinct and sensuality and just like Freud, there's a lot of people who have issues with their own sensuality, their own body. If you taught a martial arts class, there are a lot young ladies who, for that matter, a lot of young men, who come to a class and they have a relationship with their own body that is not healthy, that is not ideal. Never mind body shape, just not trusting your body and that could lead you to a whole bunch of reasons and the panther would then become a way, a vehicle, a psychological vehicle that they could then engage with. They would have a conversation about those issues in their life. Sensuality and trusting their own gut, their own bodily intelligence. There's the boa. The boa is the unconscious, it's empathy. It's like Tai Chi in terms of its fluidity, it's softness and the incredible power that comes with that softness. It's the feminine archetype. The more you fill it up, the larger it gets, it's yielding and soft and how many people have a difficult relationship with their own feminine side, with their own softness. There's plenty of classes that I've taught where I'll hear it from young ladies, sometimes I have, I don't trust my feminine side as an example. I don't know what it means to be a feminine woman for example and the boa then becomes a vehicle by which to explore that issue in this society. Why is that even an issue? Because the society doesn't even value femininity. It's very hostile as human history has clearly shown. This is not the safe place for being a woman. I've got 16 year olds, after the last election were asking how soon can I leave the States? It's like literally and there's an important conversation there and it's not just about equality, it's not just about allowing young women to be equal as men, to develop their masculine side and act with equality and be treated the same as men do, it's about treating femininity equal with the same amount of regard as masculinity is held. It's not about the sex. It's about the psychology, it's about the gender. It's about the psyche and the boa, you introduce them to the idea, the concept of the boa and you give them a vehicle to explore the power of gentleness and the gentleness of true power so then there's [00:51:11] pick one, pick one, python! There's python and it's about strategy, it's about structure that represents the skeletal system in terms of martial arts. It's your bone-breaking kinds of style. Those magical techniques where you just flick your wrists a little bit and you feel this resounding, shuddering impact drive down through your body like a ball going through a pinball machine and it manipulates structure so studies patterns and then, manipulates what it understands and I can tell you as a psychologist, yeah, we as human beings, that's what we do. We are pattern protectors and we are compelled to impose meaning on those pattern. There's a term for it, the interpreter. We can talk neuroscience later but that's what we do. We try to impose meaning on patterns whether those patterns are actually due to nature or they're just random patterns or just random events. You just try to impose meaning on those random events. That's what we do. We create meaning and that's what the python represents and so on. The leopard is intuitive, it's creative. The cobra is psychic and that's all 6 of them and yeah, again, the cats are masculine archetypes. The snakes are feminine archetypes and the idea is you integrate them so there are really, of course, some overlap among them but what I do in my classes is that I emphasize, I focus on the individual archetype, the animal archetypes and make sure that the student is well-versed, well-rounded, can embody each of the animals really powerfully, really make it something and then, then what you do and you start with the animal you're naturally most aligned with and you round it out and you really develop it and then what you do is you go to its opposite animal and then you explore that





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one and you bring it up to the equivalent level of strength and then what happens is that, by then, of course, the work starts taking up momentum on its own already a little bit but really, once you start exploring the opposite animal, there's really a synergy that starts to happen. The practice starts to have a life of its own. Things start to develop on their own scheme and there's an inherent shock in transitioning so I talk about this a little bit in the book in the end about how the process of dragon begins and one of the things that happen is you get a sort of like ontological shock. That's an expansive way of saying a sort of culture shock for one, if you will. Table for one please? I remember having that experience myself where I've been practicing tiger a lot like I got to the point where I was scaring some of the other people with how intense I was being about it and it was halfway through class and Connie just turned to me and said, okay, be boa right now and I did and I had this spontaneous unexpected sense of being seasick. It meant something to me, I took it seriously and I did do the switch and oh my god, I was nauseous, I was a little bit dizzy and it took me a while to figure out. It was like culture shock for one person. I invested so much energy and time into the tiger that when I switched, I sort of pulled a psychological rug from underneath my feet. I've gone from being very focused and hard and fiery and I went boa which was soft and omnidirectional and long wavelength and it was just disconcerting and so, that kind of shock, it's like a culture shock. Going to a different place and you're having to respond to the environment in a different way but it also brings out something different in you and you don't know how to orient yourself. There's a part of you that wakes up when you travel to places and that can be good but it can also be disconcerting and that's what happened and it had happened in a room, it had happened in a split second and nothing else had changed. It was me within myself and so that was a really important insight. If you ask where is this perspective coming from? Well, it comes from the real experience of if I just changed how I'm thinking and approaching the world, I can radically change. As I do that, I am radically changing myself and it's not about what somebody says or does to me whether they punch me or call me some sort of ethnic slur. It's not whether they're cheating me in business or as an employee, none of that has to happen. I just have to train myself from the inside and my world radically changes. That's a profound insight.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I want to take a step back. I want to look at this from a slightly different angle because what you've done is you've told us a lot about you and your training and the way you teach and fascinating stuff and I'm sure, like me, a lot of listeners are nodding their heads saying this sounds great but I don't train there and a lot of the folks we have listening aren't engaged in Chinese styles that differentiate by animal. We've got a lot of people who are karate practitioners, taekwondo practitioners or Filipino martial arts practitioners and maybe this is a segue into the book, maybe it's not; but how do you take this segmentation, this understanding of different ways that you can train and examine yourself and apply that knowledge? How can we apply that understanding or seek that understanding within non-Chinese arts through arts that are not under your tutelage?

**Steven Macramalla:**



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Of course, the book can be helpful for that. Obviously, you can check out the website, the [sixanimalskungfu.com](http://sixanimalskungfu.com) and you might find some material there that will be helpful. First, talk to your teacher. You can always reach out to me if you have questions about any of this stuff related to the animal archetypes but I don't think that none of the art, especially the traditional art lack this kind of background. They talk about the psyche, they talk about the body and they talk about interaction. You just have to ask. You just have to start the conversation, honestly. It's not like this knowledge is really hidden. It's not like it's just me. It is out there. it's just that it does take work. That's the thing and by work, I mean, yes, the work of practicing and applying it but the work also of asking about it, investigating, searching for it, calling for it and that's mostly what it is. It's not inaccessible. That would be my response and if you're looking for more guidance, absolutely start with the body. What are the different systems? How do they work? What's the intrinsic intelligence or what's the insight? What's the fundamental insight that you gain by understanding how this particular system of the body work? The heart, what does it do? Pumps blood throughout the entire body, the whole body? Yeah, no cell is too small and it's a lovely little principle or metaphor about government. The government takes care of every citizen, of every person within its boundaries and ideally, outside of its own boundaries. So there's that principle and there's that insight and when you get those insights, you write them down. You take them in. you contemplate them. You try to make them a part of your practice and you go back and forth. What insight did you get from the body? How did it extend to something outside in the real world? How is the interaction is like in the real world? What kind of insights does it give me about perhaps how the body works? What else? Basic practice, the breath. Follow your breath. I talk about this in the book. 7 steps so these are internal steps and practices that you can use to adopt these animal perspectives but they apply to any art and common to all art is follow your breath and that can mean different things or different strategies with that so there's, in western psychology, it's a mindfulness practice where you're neutrally witnessing the breath coming in and going out but in eastern practices, following the breath is also a bit more active. It incorporates that but it's also a bit more active. You're visualizing the breath going to different parts of the body and you notice how you're breathing and if I was a character in a play and I was breathing this way, what would that say about my character, that kind of thing. You observe it or sometimes you deliberately control it. I'm breathing shallow right now in a shallow way, let me take a deep breath and so, starting with the breath, that's a big one and then, mental cognitive practices. Every art has a sort of meditative or contemplative practice and I encourage people to explore them. They're there for a reason and that's the other thing too. The premise that we sort of started this conversation with is hey, I'm not here, I'm not there, there's a lack involved in there. No, you are where you are and maybe there's a purpose to that so start where you are with what you got kind of thing and when it comes to, and I'm sure where you are, what you've got, there's some easily accessible some kind of practice that is internal and meditative and contemplative at your disposal. Explore it. Ask about it. Try it out. Getting quiet is the first step. Being able to follow your breath and getting quiet mentally is the first step and that's a great place to start. Getting connected to your body, through your breath, getting connected to your body and then, for me, it goes from the body to



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movement so that's my thing. I think if I were to give a short, concise answer, I would say that. Start there. Start with the breath and connect to your body, your mind will follow.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Tell us more about the book. I mean, you've talked a little bit about it, hinted at it and why did you write it? Let's start that.

**Steven Macramalla:**

I had to. I had to. It wouldn't leave me alone.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Anyone out there understands. I get it.

**Steven Macramalla:**

Yeah, it's like that. Constantine, my teacher, had touched a lot of people's lives. There's a lot of people who regarded him as their favorite or greatest teacher they've encountered in their lives but I was like the one person who'd taken the whole system who's taken the whole system, learnt all the forms, learnt all the practices so that I can teach them down and there are other people who are prominent here and there but it kind of fell on my shoulders to pass it on and this was the best way I knew how. I know this is the age of YouTube and so on but for me, I think it could be more important to get the ideas, the philosophy, the structure down on paper so that a person could pick up a book and digest it. Yeah, I had to pass on this stuff without sounding too dramatic, it saved my life. I want to pay it forward, I want to give it back. Give the gift back so I could not, there are times where I kept wondering why am I trying to write this? Nobody else knows about it. It's not going to inform anybody else. Why don't I just try to stop and it would last 10 seconds and I was like, yeah, no, I had to write it. The reason why is that I think it's the...we're facing the real challenges today, again, environmentally, politically, socially and the solutions we will implement will be, yes, they will involve technology to some extent and they will also involve social organizations. In some levels, it's a question of political will but along the way, there are changes that we need to make in our behavior, there are insights we need to have in terms of ourselves as individuals and how we relate as people. So much of our fears of other people is based on fears or doubt or confusion that we have about ourselves and we just put it on other people. We put it on the other and the part of the process, part of the solution to solving the climate crises will involve a little bit of self-examination and introspection. What kind of habits do we really need to continue? What kind of habits do we let go? What kind of behaviors do we let go and people are going to confront fear as they do this and martial art is one of the vehicles where there is, in the hands of a good teacher, there is a structure by which you can confront a personal fear that you have and transcend it, transform through it. Most people are terrified of their own feeling. It's as simple as that. Having an angry reaction that they feel is over powerful or feeling so sad that they don't think anybody can possibly understand them



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or even, celebration. Feeling a sense of euphoria and excitement about life. They just don't know how to contain it at times. There's some sort of emotional or existential threat they feel from their own lives and they don't know if they can survive their own feeling and the purpose of archetypes and the work of Jung and all these great psychologists, no, of course, they're coming from within you. of course, I say this with certain caveats because things can get complicated but yes, if these feelings are coming from within you then yeah, you have the tools to be able to metabolize those feelings and we've got a lot of problems to solve and feelings are going to come up and we need the tools to deal with those feelings and maybe it's this archetypal system, maybe it's therapy, maybe it's art, whatever, but get there and if this system encourages people to start doing that, start doing that exploration and for some people, makes it fun, makes it interesting and makes it integrative, all the more power to it. Hallelujah, let's do this! I mean, why else did I write this? Because on a very fundamental basis, every individual is inextricably intertwined with their society and with the environment, with the ecology, the oxygen that a tree produces and consumes, the carbon dioxide that it consumes, the water the person consumes, the food they consume and then, how we defecate and put that energy and matter into that ecosystem. We are intertwined with nature. We are inextricable and this system is based on that assumption and I think that's an important way of thinking that the times demand of us. That we are not man in control and molding nature. We are a part of a system and what we do affects that system and that system will then affect us in response and that's not a scary thing but it has the potential being a beautiful dance and that's what the dragon is about. It's about that confrontation which then turns into a dance and into a celebration as you become more aware of the intricacies of who you are the animal symbolize. It's like being a musician. You become really well-versed in music and when you go and listen to it, you can appreciate all these nuances and it's sort of the same thing and what martial art gives us is the way of appreciating all these nuances of conflict and it's not just the fighting, it's the beautiful resolution between tension and opposites and all the different dynamics you can find in that and it's a gorgeous never-ending story but you can't get there if you're always afraid of it. How do you get over the fear? Through your breathing. Through the movement, through awareness of your body and having multiple facets of approaching that practice, that's key. We're complicated animals. You can't ignore the complexity and you go with the flow. That's another dimension to it. I think I'm rambling a little bit here.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's a hallmark of the show. I never consider it rambling. It's being tangential. This is all great stuff, this really is and I want to start to close some of these lines of conversation up as we wind down because, unfortunately, we do have a finite amount of time that we can talk and so I want to kind of flip this, we've talked about now, we've talked about the past and it's clear that there's a very powerful, I don't want to say force or trajectory, but there's a very strong passion in everything that you've talked about today and that's really resonating for me and if nothing else, people are picking up on that but let's look to the future because I think there's always something very telling when I ask this question. When you look at your future, what do you see coming down the pipe? If you're looking out a year, 5 years, 20 years, however far out you want to look, what's next?





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**Steven Macramalla:**

Well, the first one that comes to mind is the practice. I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing. That's not going to stop and I'm going to keep teaching and I will go through what all teachers go through in terms of having students and disseminating it and keeping the flame alive and passing it on. That's the calling, so there's that. Do I have an elixir of big business plans? If I'm called upon to teach larger classes, that's great and if not, there's so much, for me, if I'm not, there's so much more to explore and to learn. Right now, I guess, in a quick kind of image, what would the future hold for me is growing this, getting the system out there and more importantly, getting the ideas out there. Talking to people, to other martial artists. They don't have to be doing this physically. They don't have to be doing this art with me. That if the idea that we're talking about are useful, I'm ecstatic. Mission accomplished so if you take the idea of the mythos, the morphos and the logos and you're looking at your practice from that point of view, what's my background, how's the technique, an extension of the background, how am I transforming and integrating each of these experiences and that changes your practice, that's awesome. If you look at the animals and you're fascinated or you've never looked at your physical practice from each one of your physiological systems, that will add a level of depth to your practice and open avenues that are fantastic and if that happens, that's awesome. I would love for that to happen and people can dabble. They can take a little piece of this and that from some of the ideas from the book or the system and adapt it to their own and what I want to see is it's much less about for me, it's more about us is to have a conversation about martial arts that is broader, deeper. That is less about the fighting and the violence or have it, of course, or talk about instance and technique intelligently, of course, but also have a broader conversation about what it is that this as a community, that martial artists as a community, have to offer the other communities, the rest of society and there is a, my father is surgeon and doctors have this kind of like the humble respect, good doctors have this, the humble respect and reverence for the magic and the wonders of the physical body. It's ability to heal and it's intricate complexity and martial artists also have a similar regard. It's like really down to earth kind of reality check we have with physical training and pain. Getting hurt here or there or getting into a lock and the sort of undeniable reality of the physical body and we, dancers have it too. It comes back down to what's happening physically. It keeps things, not simple but fun and that's an important reminder. Reminding the society of the integrity that is involved in having an animal-like body, of having a soft animal of a body. It's an important reminder. It's so easy to get lost or forget or abstract it away that things come back down. All of these stuff around comes back down to various simple principles that have to be applied with extreme care and attention. Simple but not easy and having that conversation, having this conversation where, as martial artists, we have something to offer the rest of society and it's through this practice with the mind, the body and the heart and the spirit meet. It's a place where the knowledge you encounter in a book, in math, in history, can interface, can be expressed through movement. That's what I would say about the future. We need to open up the conversation. We need to make this more than just about ourselves and individuals. We need to bring it to a larger audience and address underlying issues that we are all facing together commonly, in common.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Good stuff. Where can people find you online? The book, website, social media, any of that?

**Steven Macramalla:**

I am at [www.sixanimalskungfu.com](http://www.sixanimalskungfu.com) and I can be reached at [info@sixanimals.com](mailto:info@sixanimals.com). To the website, you can reach out. There are some basic information about the animals and the archetypes. There's also a personality quiz that you can take to find out which animals you're strongest in and you can read the description on the website and you can also then order the book to read about the animals in the book and find out more about how you can develop different aspects about your own animals and yeah, I'm also doing a, I've done a bit of a book tour and my next stop, we are in 2019, for those of you who listen to this podcast in some other year, November 21<sup>st</sup>, I'm in Boulder, Colorado, Thursday, 7:30 PM, 21<sup>st</sup> of November doing a book talk there and I'll also be doing a little workshop in the Boulder Main Library the next day on a Friday and yeah, I'm available. What I like to do is do workshops. I also provide lifestyle coaching consultations based on the animals so if people are interested in that, they can reach out for that. Hit me up! Let's do a workshop. Dancers and yogis, other martial artists, you've listened to the podcast so now you know what you'll be getting.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Cool. Great stuff. Now, we ask all of our guests to send us out into the outro in the same way and that is what parting words or words of wisdom or final thoughts or however you want to term it, would you leave the listeners with today?

**Steven Macramalla:**

I hate this question!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Okay, why?

**Steven Macramalla:**

There's so much to choose from!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yes but what you choose tells us so much and that's why I like it. That's why it's cliché as it is.

**Steven Macramalla:**

Okay, let's see, hold on. Everyday it's a different thing, every day in every way. If you open your eyes and it's there, it's masculine. If you close your eyes and it's there, it's feminine.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I suspect, now that you've listened to the episode, you know why I didn't do my typical summary at the beginning and I'd rather not do a poor job if I can get away with doing no job and letting the guest do it so much better and that's what we had today. I really enjoyed this episode. Such a great conversation and I really hope I get to talk to him again so, Sifu, thank you, thank you, thank you. I appreciate your time. If you want to learn more about this episode, go to [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) episode 454. You'll see a bunch of resources over there from photos and links to a bunch more to help you get more out of this show. Maybe you want to contact Sifu, it's all there for you all for free. If you got something out of this episode, share it with your friends. Help people learn about martial arts radio and everything we got going on here or you can leave us a review. iTunes, Stitcher, Facebook, Google. Tons of places, you leave us a review, it helps or you can make a purchase, [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com), PODCAST15 gets you 15% off any of the stuff over there. We're always looking for great guest suggestions so don't be afraid to reach out on that. There's a form on the website. Our social media is @whistlekick and my email address is [jeremy@whistlekick.com](mailto:jeremy@whistlekick.com). That's all I've got for you today. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!