



Episode 480 — Mr. Jeff Kelly | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey, how's it going? This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 480 with today's guest, Mr. Jeff Kelly. My name is Jeremy Lesniak, your host on the show, founder of whistlekick and everything we're doing here is in support of traditional martial arts. If you want to know more about what we do, hop on over to whistlekick.com. That's our digital hub, that's the place you can find the store. If you use the code PODCAST15, you can save 15% on some gear or uniform or maybe a shirt or hat. Everything for this show is in a different website, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. That's where we put up links and photos and videos and all kinds of good stuff. Transcripts, you name it, it's over there for every single episode we've ever done. Yeah, we bring you 2 episodes a week. We're creeping up on episode 500. We've got big stuff in the works and why are we doing all this? We want to educate, entertain and inspire traditional martial artists all over the world. If you want to help the work that we're doing, couple of things you can do that: you can make a purchase, you can share an episode, you can leave us a review somewhere or you can support the Patreon, Patreon.com/whistlekick and if you contribute 5 bucks or more, we're going to give you even more stuff so your thank you comes with more than you. Like all guests, I really enjoyed talking to Mr. Kelly. We had a great conversation. We talked a lot about his past and the really interesting path that he's been on. Some of the really unique experiences. Stuff that, frankly, made me jealous. I hope you enjoyed as much as I did so here we go. Mr. Kelly, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.



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Jeff Kelly:

Hi, Jeremy. Good to be here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's good to have you here. Thank you for your time. Thanks for coming on and I wanted to start, listeners, what you don't know is there's a lot of back end stuff that happens before we bring a guest on and one of the questions that we ask, of course, is around title because it's a martial arts show so we try to be respectful of people's title. A lot of people don't care about them and, quite often, we'll have people that will say just call me by my first name. Call me Jeremy but this was the 1st time anyone has answered this question in the way that you did so in the box for title, you put 'Supreme Master of the Known Universe', just kidding, I'd be happy to explain why. I don't really use titles. So I want to start there because it made me chuckle and hopefully, it made everyone else chuckle just now.

Jeff Kelly:

Oh good! That was my goal.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I could tell.

Jeff Kelly:

On the topic of titles, there's 2 things. I teach both Filipino Martial Arts Pekiti-Tirsia Kali and Chen t'ai chi ch'uan and I have a title with the Filipino Martial Arts, Guro, which simply means teacher and there's various levels of that and I've never really cared about that. I've got permission from my teacher to teach and that's good enough for me. As far as the Chinese martial arts go, the term is Shirfu or in Cantonese, sifu. The problem with that is that it's an honorific. No one should ever call themselves Master or Shirfu/Sifu. That's something other people call you. You will have a relationship if you have disciples and I have one. You'll have a relationship with them and the proper form addresses a Shirfu. In fact, my disciple, Patty, I don't think she even knows what my real name is anymore, calls me Shirfu. As far as the other students, it's up to them. It's a little awkward for people because you don't know me outside a studio, perhaps, or the school and I'm very informal so I teach a lot of seniors with the community college or the local university here. It's a little weird for them to start calling me master or Shirfu or something like that so I leave it up to them. Also, kind of awkward to which one do they call me? Shirfu or Guro? I know Dan Inosanto, he, obviously prefers to go by his name but out of respect, I see people using Sifu/Guro which just is a little unwieldy so I tried doing the whole call me by this title thing and it really didn't work too much. If people want to call me Shirfu, that's fine. Another thing too, speaking as an honorific, it's nothing to do with martial arts per se. I remember one time in China, we were getting on the bus, my friend had asked the driver a question and he started with Shirfu, which was do we go or when will we be there and I was like whoa! So, this driver's a martial arts master? No,



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that's just a term for someone who's mastered their craft. It could be a chef, it could be a taxi driver so it's just a form of respect for someone who's mastered their craft. Shirfu actually means Father-Teacher or actually backwards, Teacher-Father so when you enter in a formal relationship with that, traditionally, you do a little ceremony and the student brings you a tea and wraps a gift and take some vows and that's what we did with my disciple or apprentice, Patty. That's a very special relationship. She asked me one time how long is that, I say 'til death and beyond. You don't break that and so, you don't really, again, it's not something that you call yourself. I had a relationship with my Shirfu, [06:35] of the Shaolin Temple and so, of course, I call him Shirfu. When we're talking about the other teachers' masters, we'd say you Shirfu or Shirfu so and so which simply means master so and so out of respect but you can't earn the title. There's no test you can take you can take traditionally in Chinese martial arts so it's up to my students and they want to call me this or that, the Guro thing is a little easier for people. Mostly because I have a stick and if they don't say it, they're in trouble but I'm not going to enforce titles or anything.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's an interesting. We're at this, what feels to be this transitional time in traditional arts in that titles and stripes and rank have become so inflated that it's becoming diluted and I'm seeing more and more people step away from them. We've been doing this show close to 5 years and in the first year, even the first couple years, it was rare for someone to say that they want to be called by their first name or Mr., Mrs. But now, the majority of people coming on this show, that's what they're asking for.

Jeff Kelly:

Yeah, I'm not quite sure why that would be. I have a lot of respect for Brazilian jiu-jitsu because they have made the requirements for a black belt very strict so if you're a black belt, it's understood that you've gone through quite a vigorous process and that you're worthy of that title. The belt ranking thing, it's great if you want to make money. Even with BJJ, you have to not only take tests but you have to put in a certain number of class appearances to get your rank and that keeps you as a regular student. The other type of ranks, you have to take tests which is a fee and if you sometimes have to get a stripe, you sometimes take a test and you keep the money train rolling in. It may be obvious throughout this conversation that I'm very bad with business and money so there's no interest on my part for doing the ranking thing. It was very relaxed to, even with the FMA Pekiti-Tirsia, getting ranked and it was one school because it was ran by my friend and mentor, teacher, Tom Bisio who has appeared on this show and I remembered when one of my classmates was promoted to Guro, Tom just gave him a letter. That was great. In my case, that was a little different. I had to leave New York and I spent 2 years back in North Carolina teaching, not being able to study per se. I think I went up for a seminar with [09:58]but, in fact, it was for a seminar. Went up there to the seminar the next day and I was talking with Tom on the phone and he goes, oh yeah, we're going to make some time for your test and I was like test? We've never done tests before. Oh yeah, you just do some of this, you just do some sparring and I'm like oh great, thanks for letting me know and so, the next day, we're doing, I remember, a step of the sparring



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where Tom's watching and he knows my abilities so we're not worried about that but at the back of the room was [10:35] who didn't know me that well and I'm looking back there and boy, if he shakes his head no, it's all done but he signed the certificate so I guess, he approved but we didn't do any ranks. We had beginners, we had advanced students and we had teachers. I've gone just a little bit different, very slightly, more for motivation and more for appreciation of the established that only teachers can wear red shirts and everybody else we start out in black although they can wear anything they want or those who asked to be advanced students or invited to be advanced students. They're going to wear a blue shirt. In fact, I'm buying them all for this group because they're kind of the plank holders. The first group that have been promoted into advanced students. A little motivation there. With Chen t'ai chi ch'uan, of course, there's no ranks whatsoever but I came up with some pins. I've got some yin yang type pins so when they complete one section of form, they get one pin and then, so on and so forth but that's it. That's just a little token. The form itself tells you how far they are and, again, that goes back to the matter. It's the honorific but Chinese people know and if the guy's good, he's a master and he deserves that title and if he's not, everybody knows it so it's based on your abilities and people figure it out, usually.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I like the idea of the pins. I've heard a lot of different things to signify progress through the martial arts but pins, it's the first time I've heard that. I like that idea.

Jeff Kelly:

We're trying to avoid the BJJ thing of having advertisements all over the uniforms. We wear different uniforms for Chen t'ai chi ch'uan. A little different than most schools where putting patches on it just didn't look right. We have our logo on the front but even putting the pins on uniform, it just doesn't work so people just keep them at home.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, we're talking about Taichi and you talked about shaolin temple and you've mentioned Filipino arts so, at some point and now is probably as good a time as any, let's see if we can go back and tie a thread through that and how did you get there? That's the wrong question. How did you get here and connect all those dots? That's the question. There we go.

Jeff Kelly:

It all started when it started. I'll give you 2 words: Billy Jack. The movie Billy Jack. My friend and I went to see that and he just got all hot and bothered and went and found the only school that existed in Winston-Salem, North Carolina at that time. The taekwondo school, the Kim school of taekwondo. His family was a little better off than mine so he joined right away. I was making money. I was 14, I was making money by mowing lawns so I saved up enough money to join. I couldn't afford the uniform. I



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don't know where I got this but I had a judo gi so you can imagine summertime with the heat and humidity and a tiny room with no air-conditioning and a bunch of people sweating, just how comfortable that was and so, I did for a couple months and then the grass stopped growing and I didn't have any money for lessons. My folks were not interested in subsidizing me so I went to the teacher, I said look, I don't have any money. I may have to quit. He said let me do something so he checked with Master Kim, he backed me and said you'll clean the dojang and you can continue to study so that's what I did for the next 4 years. every night, I swept the dojang and mopped it once or twice a month and very rarely missed a class, at least 3 times a week and I did that until I was 18 and got my blackbelt and from there, I went to college in Greensborough, North Carolina and I just took advantage of whatever was around. I did some Okinawan Karate for a while, some Japanese jujitsu from one of the professors. Some aikido so whatever was available, I did and so, after that was a dry period. I was teaching some taekwondo and stuff but I was never really good at it. I'm not very flexible. I can't make the high kicks look any good so it wasn't really the right thing for me. What really worked well for me, the inspiration that I got was not so much from one person but from black belt and karate illustrated magazines because there was no variety in our town. I would read the magazines and I was particularly drawn to the more exotic arts. Savate, Pencak Silat, I don't know where else. Something about Chen t'ai chi ch'uan. I got some magazines that featured [16:49] on them so eventually, in a circuitous route, I moved to New York city. The first thing I did, I hit a magazine and said he was teaching at the Filipino consulate so I think within the first day or two, I went over there asking about him but he'd already moved to Texas so I was extremely disappointed so I was just kind of wandering around going to various martial arts stores in town, as you would, and I got Dan Inosanto's book, the Filipino Martial Arts and I got a broom handle and I'm trying to figure out how to do this from a book and amazingly, I went into a martial store and there was a flier for a class, Filipino Martial Arts class, Pekiti-Tirsia so I called the guy up, Tom Bisio, he was very nice to me on the phone and I went to the next class and never left. That was the art for me. You didn't have to be flexible. It was very difficult. I thought my black belt in taekwondo was going to help me. It did not. The movements are so different, I just felt like a completely out of place for the first year. That was the beginning of that. As far as the Chinese arts, after a couple years, things weren't really happening at home. I had gotten a teacher's certificate and taught high school for a year and hated it and to deal with boredom, I went to Wake Forest University and took some classes in Chinese language and liked it, enjoyed it and then, well, you know what? I can teach anywhere, might as well teach in China so I talked to my professor and he talked to his professor and they got me a job at a university in Hunan Province. A small town by their standards and so, I went there and of course, I sought out whatever martial arts you could find which was, mostly, wushu. In fact, the PE teacher for the university, I worked with him quite a bit because at that time, that was part of their curriculum, it was martial arts so he knew the exterior forms for a lot of things. We worked on Xing Yi. He taught me a shortened Chen version of the form and some wushu which were good for basics and so, I spent a year doing that and in the meantime, I had one of my friends contact the Chen School of t'ai chi ch'uan in the Chen village and we made arrangements for me to go and study for 6 months. I moved up from Hunan Province to the city of Jianguo which is the biggest city nearby and so, I went out to Chen village which



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at that time was extremely small. We're talking dirt, main street and mudbrick houses and stuff and the Chen school's the only one there and was kind of rundown with missing windowpanes and such. I believe I was the 3rd foreigner who ever studied there so we went and we're going to finish the paperwork here and I can get started in 6 months because I've just enough money to be able to study there and enough to live on until I could find a job which was pretty easy. You walk into a university and they'll pretty much hire you as a foreigner. Unfortunately, when I got there, first thing they tried to do, all the school's not good enough for foreigners. You should stay here in the county seat town and we'll put you in a nice hotel and we'll have one of the masters, Master [21:24] come in and teach you an hour or two a day. I was like no, I've got plenty of time. I don't have much money and I want to go to the school so we drove out to the school and they put their heads together and they said well, we have to change things a bit and the price has gone up so they ended up charging me the 6 months' price they've given me now just covered one month so I was pretty devastated. I went home to where I'm staying and thought about it. I said well, it's better than nothing. If I've done the 6 months, I wouldn't have had any money to survive on so I went back and I said ok, let's do it so I was able to study about a month at the school. I had my own private room. Most of the students there were young, about 20 and stuff. I was about 30 at that time. In fact, I was the oldest, save for one gentleman, very nice guy I don't know, in his 40s or 50s and he was from the North. He spoke beautiful mandarin because there was no English and luckily, I spoke Mandarin but the problem was the teachers were all country folk and they had their own accent so this gentleman was kind enough to translate their mandarin into mandarin I can understand so that helped a great deal so we worked all together about 8 hours a day, 6 days a week for a month and so, I was able to learn a complete first form of the old style, lao jia yi lu, and the double edged sword, dan jian, and the broad sword, dan dao, and the rest of the year, I made arrangements with Grand Master Chen Xiaowang. It was his brother that ran the school and he arranged for me to work with one of his top students and we worked on the new form, the first form of the new style, xin jia yi lu, so that was the Chen side of it. Now, the shaolin side, if you don't mind me diving into that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

No, no, let's do it. We're getting a story here but there's also, you're giving us a lot of context in a way that we don't often get when people travel overseas and when they're just kind of students. There's bits of context here that's happening that I'm really enjoying, so please.

Jeff Kelly:

One of the reasons this happens is because I do everything wrong and backwards. The smart thing to have done was to work for an English company teaching English so they would pay you in American dollars and you'd be in Beijing or something. The school I was at, Ling Ling Teachers' College, had never had a foreigner and, in fact, in that county, they pretty much have never seen a foreigner so the conditions were pretty much what everybody else did. They had gotten me a western toilet and they were extremely proud of this because most people had a hole that often was in the shower so you'd go in the shower in that hole and then you take a shower and clean it up that way so I had my western



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toilet which made life easier and so, that was difficult but I got some good training with the basics and getting better with the language. I actually spoke better than I thought I did but that's another story so by living in the country and basically being on my own had made it possible for me to go up and study. The shaolin connection comes out about, so shaolin is not that far from Jianguo either. That time it was about 2-hour bus rides and there were no highways and so, I went out there to check it out. Of course, you got to make the pilgrimage and hated it. I absolutely hated it. There was about a half-mile road to get to it, the bus will drop you off and it was just full of kiosks on either side of the street, people selling really cheap weapons and crappy t-shirts and then, we got into the temple; of course, it was summertime so there's a huge number of tourists and they had the same kiosks in the temple. They had cheap swords and crappy beads all over the temple. It was just really disgusting. It was not a temple anymore. It was a very old shopping mall so I didn't like it at all and I thought ok, well, I've done that then I went to the Chen school and so then, I got a job in Jianguo, I was teaching and one day I was in a shop buying a sword. I had given mine away in the village and the gentleman came up to me and wanted to make sure I wasn't being cheated because that was not an uncommon occurrence there. When they saw me as a foreigner, they would jack their prices up so we got to talking and, it turns out, when he found out I was a martial artist, he said well, I write for martial arts magazines so we got to be good friends. I go and visit him and his family and one day, I noticed he had a Buddhist statue of Guanyin. This is extremely rare, especially 30 years ago. Religion was not encouraged, shall we say, so it's pretty brave of him to even have that. He told me, I'm a disciple of the shaolin temple. Do you want to go out there some time? Sure, ok. Well, he showed up at my door one day, a couple of weeks later and said hey, the shaolin monks are doing a demonstration in Luoyang, do you want to go? Oh, yeah, sure, I want to go so we got over to the temple which had finally gotten rid of all their trinket sellers so it was more like a temple. We stayed over there at one of his friends' place so we're getting on the bus the next morning and we're getting to Luoyang and I get on the bus and I look around and it's full of shaolin monks and they were very nice, very welcoming. We got to talking and they found out I was a martial artist and they said oh, you've got to demonstrate with us. You've got to show your martial arts. Oh no, I couldn't really. Oh no, you must. They really insisted so I'm thinking well, I've got the Chen t'ai chi I can do and they said oh no, you have to do 2. You have to do another forms. Well, I guess I could do some Pekiti-Tirsia. We don't really have forms but I can take something so they took a staff and cut it in half so I had 2 sticks approximately the correct length and so, we're all set there so I'm watching from the wings at the performance and it's absolutely amazing. These guys are punching and kicking with power and speed and then they've got some hard qigong where they're hitting up bars, red hot bars and putting them on their tongues and breaking things over their heads and spears on their neck and the crowd is just loving it. They introduced me and I walk out and I'm going to do Chen t'ai chi ch'uan and I start the movement and I can just hear the audience falling asleep because suddenly, here I am doing this slow motion thing so I cut it down at the first opportunity to get out of it. I cut it down. I probably did 10, 20 movements just so I could get out there because they weren't there to see me and then, later for the 2nd performance, I did the double stick. Again, we had no forms, just freestyling and if you don't know, it doesn't look like much so they probably all thought I was just waving a stick around so that wasn't too



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impressive although what came out of that, eventually, was one of my Dharma brothers [31:11] actually asked me about it one time and wanted to learn it and he said show me the form and I said well, we don't have forms and the idea of having him do hundreds of repetitions of one strike and footwork and stuff, that wasn't going to go over. That's not how the Chinese mindset works so we did the performance and my friend, Wang Bin, said would you like to meet my teacher? Oh, sure. We go and meet him and he said would you like to become a disciple. I'm like oh yeah. I had no idea what was involved so we're in a little hotel room and I have a picture of this in my blog and there I am kneeling on the floor and this master's making me a Buddhist disciple and also, one of his disciples. Come to find out, my master is one of the most famous shaolin monks in the country. I should say the most famous. Really loved by people, everybody wanted to be his disciple and he didn't take that many. His name is Grandmaster Shi Suxi. I should point out too that Shi, what we would call his last name, is all monks' last name. It's short for Shijiamouni or Shakyamuni, the original Buddha, so all monks have that as their family name and I really want to point out that no one was not an ordained monk should use that as their name. They should use their own family name. I was given a Buddhist name [32:57] which means overflowing with virtue and I kept my Chinese family name which was Ke or an abbreviation or translation of Kelly, the best they could do so I would be [33:13] not Shi [33:15] and I see a lot of that being abused so unless you're an actual practicing monk, you shouldn't use that as a name. So, anyway, I became a 31st-generation lay disciple of the shaolin temple.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Can I jump in on something?

Jeff Kelly:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And if you're going to get there, by all means, keep going where you're going but you've expressed the standing that this man has and that he doesn't take, or at least, wasn't taking very many disciples on but he took you on without, from what I heard, you even fully understanding what that meant so I want to know why.

Jeff Kelly:

That was all due to Wang Bin. Wang Bin was a lay disciple as well and he was respected and Shirfu liked him a lot so it was only because he interceded that he took me on and that came, that held true later on. I met this gentleman from Denmark, Thomas [34:18] and he had gotten a raw deal spending with the training center and seemed like a really good kid and so, I talked to Shirfu, I said he'd like to be a disciple and Shirfu said ok and he has been an incredible disciple his whole life then later on, we met a couple guys from Australia. Since Thomas had become a disciple, he asked me if I would ask Shirfu about that



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and he accepted them as well so it was simply because of Wang Bin that I was able to become a disciple and the other thing was that, I wasn't interested in Shaolin martial arts. When I had moved to China, I knew 2 things: I wanted to say Taoism and I did not want to do shaolin because, to me, it was more taekwondo. I wasn't flexible and such so I wasn't really interested in that. I wanted to do Chen t'ai chi ch'uan so it was because I was more interested in Buddhism that I think Shirfu accepted me and we would go every opportunity to shaolin and try to study Buddhism or at least be present. It was really difficult to study. I didn't have the vocabulary for that level of philosophy but I ended up learning shaolin martial arts in a very interesting way. Again, Wang Bin, talked to some of the monks and said hey, this guy is a martial artist, would you teach him something and he said oh, they're going to teach you and so we went to their practice area and so, one of the monks was there and he was going to start teaching me and I can just tell that he does not want to do this. He does not think I'm serious and he really doesn't want to waste his time teaching me so he taught me a little bit, very begrudgingly, and I went home and practiced every day and, for a week, and in fact, I actually had a dream about one of the movements and how it could be used so when I went back the next week, he saw that I had practiced and again, I want to emphasize that I had no natural ability but I had the proper attitude and he saw that I had practiced, I told him about this dream, he was impressed with that and so, he became very happy to teach me. In fact, by the time the year was over, monks were coming to me to teach me different forms and weapons way more than I could actually process. In fact, one of the monks started to teach me, what he described as the secret form, using the prayer hands where the hands are placed together palms together. I didn't get the whole thing but it was, I guess, it was just fated to be but honestly I think is one, I spoke Chinese and you just can't, people are not going to translate at that time and because I was a genuinely interested in studying Buddhism. In fact, I went on to take on what is known as the Bodhisattva precepts. This is a pure Buddhist thing where you vow to a form of conduct and you vow to become a Bodhisattva which is a being that vows to put off final enlightenment and try to benefit mankind and puts off final enlightenment until all beings are enlightened. Again, his disciples, he wouldn't let them do it. He asked me. He said I want you to go and take this ceremony about these precepts and he had not let any of his monk disciples do this so when they heard I was doing it, of course, they went up to Shirfu's and go oh, you let Jeff, you got to let us do it so he did and we went to the original first temple in China, the White Horse temple, and spent a week taking these precepts but again, I think it was the sincerity there. I ended up learning martial arts and Buddhism and having the incredible good fortune to become a lay disciple in the temple and I think it was all due to the respect and genuine interest in what was going on.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's some great stuff. It almost sounds like book or movie worthy. It's quite the journey for a westerner. It seems like, at every point, you're talking about these things that most people don't get the opportunity for and I would imagine that even in those moments, you were aware of these opportunities and how fortunate you are.



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Jeff Kelly:

Yeah, but you know what? It was cool but I'd never traded on that. I never tried to make a big deal out of it, again, it was a process that was not, I wasn't doing it for that. In fact, I've really never taught shaolin and try shaolin fist for 2 reasons: one, I was only there for a year. I didn't feel like I scratched the surface. I learned a bunch of forms but I never got deeper than that. That's the Chinese way so I didn't feel like I could really offer the entire art and one of my brothers, term is sisung, one of my dharma brothers' said you don't just teach anybody. You have to make sure they're a proper character so don't just teach anyone so I never traded on that. I've written articles in Black belt magazine about the temple and stuff but it just seemed like the right thing. Of course, it was cool and everything but I wasn't so interested on the reputation of being a disciple as it was just being there with Shirfu and my dharma brothers. They would come and they were travelling and they would come and stay with me at my apartment. I'm going to get upset about this so yeah. I think the happiest I've ever been was one day, winter time, and there was snow in the mountains and it was cold. The sun was out, I'm sitting next to Shirfu at his apartment, just sitting there, looking at the mountains, being warm. He was reciting some sutras, mumbling the sutras and just sitting next to him was probably one of the most content times of my life and so, to me, just being there with Shirfu and my brothers, that's what it was all about. The martial arts were fun. I'm a martial artist. I'm never going to not do that but it was more just being a part of that. They never treated me differently and they would say all people are the same so I felt extremely comfortable there. It's a beautiful temple so I spent as much time as possible just to be there. It was peaceful, it was beautiful. I had good friends and I had my teacher so to me, it was special but not special. Coming back, not everybody knows about shaolin. You bring it up at parties and everyone's what? Oh, remember the David Carradine show? Yeah, it looks nothing like that. There's no black rooms with candles so I never tried to use that for my own gain. I don't think that's in keeping with the tradition of the temple. I've tried to be a good disciple. I'm not. I could be a lot better but to capitalize on it, just seems to me to be wrong and things have gotten bad. The government gets involved. It's no longer the independent place of cultivation that it used to be and you've got these traveling groups of monks that are doing performances and such and most of them are not monks. You may get one but these days, there's probably not any. These are martial artist who have trained in training facilities and they can do the common forms and they do them very well but they're not monks but they represent themselves as monks. What they do as martial artists is they find teachers in Shaolin and get a Buddhist name so they can use that and shave their heads and they run around the United States drinking and smoking and eating meat and picking up on women and people go oh, that's what a shaolin monk is and it's not. Even though, I'm not a monk, I've taken some advanced vows, precepts, that you try to hold to and that's just not how you act so my hope is that I can represent shaolin as it was and be true to the temple and Shirfu and hopefully, he's not too mad at me now.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Let's switch gears because you just opened yourself up pretty well and I don't want to throw anything else in there. I appreciate your trust with me and with this audience in sharing that so deeply. Let's come forward. Let's talk about now. We heard about what you're doing and some of the things that you're teaching but I want to connect these two stories that you've told today, the now and what you're doing with how you got there. We opened the show with a little bit of a joke. This sarcastic title that you put down in your form but I think that these two pieces that we're talking about, likely, whether as you want to think of it as the duality of yin and yang or something like that, I think that we're seeing 2 very distinct sides of you. Your sharing as an instructor and here, this value of belonging to a community and these are universal experiences. This desire to belong, this desire to share, to spread what we've acquired, what we've learned. How has your past and this belonging, this experience of a culture that most of us will never be part of, how has that impacted, what and how, I think more importantly the how, you teach today? How did your experience in China affect who you are as a teacher now?

Jeff Kelly:

It absolutely does and the real benefit of studying over there is you see how it's perceived and here in this country, we tend to think as everything Chinese as magic. You say shaolin and you're a magic fighter and it's not the way it's approached there. it's not a big deal. This is what you do and these people that, well, the Chinese expression is to [48:07], eat bitter. These people who endured their whole life in training are exceptional but that's because that's what they do so I understand that it is hard work. It's nothing magical so you have to put in the time, you have to put in the effort. Nothing comes easy and again, I'm a traditionalist so I feel the duty to teach as it should be taught. This is especially true with Chen t'ai chi ch'uan because I'm an 11th-generation student, not a disciple, student, of Chen t'ai chi ch'uan which is an unbroken line. 300 years back to the founder Chen Wangting so what I teach is what has been taught for 300 years. There've been, obviously, improvements or evolution but just recently, I found a book that was a translation of a book written by a gentleman that was renowned as the teacher of the 4 grandmasters. He really helped the art survive and grow. His name was Chen Zhaopei and this book was published in 1935 and he does step by step directions how to do the movements. You got to picture the final movement and so, I took this book and I went to class and I said ok, students, I want you to do this movement. It's the 3rd movement that we do that's called [50:05] and so I said, ok, do this movement. They all do the movement just the way I taught them and then, I took the book and said ok, follow these instructions and I read them right out of the book from 1935 and it was exactly what I've taught and I haven't read that book until that week but it was exactly how I taught them so I told them what has been done since, at least 1935 and a generation before that because this gentleman had to learn from somebody so there's a lot of, nowadays, lot of different types of Chen on the internet, on YouTube. You can see all kinds and you have performance, you have new frame and old frame. Every teacher does it differently and I used to try to point out to students, well, if students are seeing this, what's going on is seeing that and now, I just tell them, whatever they do is fine. You know what you're doing is authentic and stretches back to the beginning so everything else that everyone else does is fine but you can rest assured that you are learning authentic Chen t'ai chi ch'uan and by the same token, I



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can't train people the way they do in China. I can't have people do one movement for 6 months until they're satisfactory. I can't beat people with switches and make them kneel down for a half hour on concrete.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You could but you wouldn't have students for very long.

Jeff Kelly:

It's tough enough to find students and the same too, with Chen, it's the original form and it is a martial art. All the other forms of Taichi are descendant from it. Yang, Wu, Hao, Wu, Sun and if you look at the birthdays of the founders, you can see that it goes in that line so this was developed as a martial art and so, what happened over time is that some of the aspects of it were deemphasized. In Chen, you have punches and kicks and it's done with power. You have jumps, you have stretches going all the way to the ground and they're all designed as a martial art and what's fascinating to me is that, I have been without a teacher for 30 years. Just where I live and my financial state wasn't able to get any training so no one showed me what these applications are but I've discovered on my own a lot of the applications and what's fascinating is that to be effective, they have to be done exactly as they're done in the form. When I was in china, I asked my teachers, oh hey, show me some of the applications, they said no. Just practice the form and now, I understand the wisdom of that. You have to do it exactly as a form and then it will work. If you make changes, it doesn't and you have to read to get the higher level training because I'll show these applications to my students and they can't make them work which was my experience in china as well. When I was studying, all the students in the village at the school and we asked our teacher, hey, show us some application and he finally gave up. He showed us one and he went around the room cranking on everybody and oh god, it hurt and then, we tried it and none of us could make it work and on a side note, one of the Chinese students got so upset, he challenged the teacher and the teacher said basically the equivalent of come at me, bro and the guy rushed at him, the teacher tossed him across the room and we never questioned him again.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's fascinating. There's so much discussion in the martial arts community and the traditional application. The Japanese bunkai, I don't know what the word would be in other languages but the importance of it and I think, all too often, we forget that if you're not able to call upon that application when needed, your understanding of it is useless so that kind of remind me where my mind was going, you're talking about, to some of us, excessive repetition. The perfectionism that you're experiencing which, the little bit of it that I've come to understand of what training in china is like from guests on the show, it's 2 things. There's a lot of volume of training and that it was very exacting and to my mind, as you discover the application, you talked about this; it came from your own understanding but I would imagine, your ability to use it is that much greater because those movements are so deeply instilled.



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Jeff Kelly:

Yeah, what's fascinating, I think you go through stages. You have to master the form. You do have to do some sensitivity work to what was called pushing hands. The problem I have with that is that people think that's the be all and end all and they actually have contests now of pushing hands which is basically poor wrestling and that's not what it's supposed to be at all. It's working with a partner to develop sensitivity so you have to have a certain amount of that and once you do and you have to master the very basic concept of what's known as self-rearing energy that is very simple to learn but incredibly detailed and incredibly useful and then, when you do get to the applications, what we found is that one of the other aspects that tells you that it's correct is that it's absolutely effortless. In fact, I've tossed my apprentice across the room one time and said come on, you're faking. No, no, that was real and then, she tossed me across the room one time and you got to remember she's about 5'4", 120 pounds and she said oh, you're faking and she said I know. Well, I didn't do anything. So the criteria is that it has to be exactly like the form because you see people on the internet and stuff and they're doing so called applications but they don't do the entire movement. They'll take a piece out of it and that's very obvious but I've written some guidelines. I've put guidelines together on how to figure out applications. Got it on my blog but hopefully, I'll do a podcast like this talking about it and it's a matter of self-discovery and there's a lot of concept. You mentioned yin and yang earlier and thank you so much for pronouncing it correctly.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I try. I do try.

Jeff Kelly:

There's no yang sound in Mandarin.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Oh, ok. So, there's actually a right way.

Jeff Kelly:

Oh, absolutely, yeah. It's the language. Yang is correct and I've heard you in the past pronounce Taichi correctly. It is ji, not chi and that's from a misunderstanding of the transliteration system so it looks like chi so people think that the word is related to the internal energy, the vital energy of the body and the universe. That's not it at all. In fact, Taichi has nothing to do with martial arts. It is a Taoist concept that means grand ultimate and it's the concept of going from nothingness to something. Going from no form to form and it's a very common term in Taoism and no one who spoke Chinese would confuse the two because if you look at the characters, it's very different. If you're looking at the characters, it's Taichi or tai ji, which wouldn't make any sense, you wouldn't make that mistake and that's another aspect of Chen t'ai chi ch'uan too is that it does incorporate more than just the physical. There are philosophical



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elements that the founder, Chen Wangting, actually took movements that already existed that were part of the external martial arts practice at that time and what he did was he brought in the concepts of internal energy and Taichi, Chinese medicine, Qigong breathing and created this art and so, I like to demonstrate to people how deep it goes. The very first movement is called opening movement and it's simply taking a shoulder-wide stance and the arms raised up and come back down again. Fairly similar, I'm sure, to a lot of other martial arts but what I'd like to do is show these students that it actually represents Taoist cosmology. Going from nothing, the [01:00:23] to the beginning of form, the potential for all things is the tai ji, which The One, which then gives birth to The Two, Yin and Yang, which gives birth to the Three, heaven, earth and humankind which gives birth to the 10,000 things and I can show all of that to you in one movement. In fact, I did do a video on that on our YouTube channel but that demonstrates just how deep and how rich the art of Chen t'ai chi ch'uan is and again, that's something that I point out into getting back to the martial arts aspect. It's hard to learn. It's very exacting, it's complicated and that's one of the reasons it's not as popular but what most people think of as Taichi is Yang style which is derived from Chen. They took out the hard movements, it's much simpler so I always tell my students what are all the reasons it's so complicated is that it's martial art and I have incredible respect for them. Anybody who comes back for a second or third class, I have a lot of respect because they're doing something that is not easy and a lot of my students are in their 70s and 80s and I got them in there before they knew what they were getting into but they've accepted it and they've really enjoyed it and they're up to the challenge. They like the challenge. They could be doing yang and other styles there would be a lot easier but again, that gets back to you don't gain gong fu, you don't gain skill without a lot of hard work and dedication.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's a well-articulated statement and I appreciate that and it might not seem as poignant if you don't know that gong fu can refer to something far more than simply martial arts.

Jeff Kelly:

Exactly. It's a skill derived from hard work and dedication so a great pianist has gong fu. A great martial artist has gong fu. A great chef has gong fu and that's the ultimate goal is not just to be able to do pretty form but to develop that sum that is greater than the parts that we call gong fu.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's turn our eyes to the future. It sounds like you got some good stuff going on and challenging yourself. Anyone who has, year later, without anyone telling them to, discovering things out of their own training is clearly dedicated and thoughtful and many other that I wish all martial artists. When you look into the future, when you look over the next couple years, 5 years, 10 years, however long you want to look out, what's the goal? What are you hoping? If I gave you a time machine and you could



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fast-forward to the next however many years and see where you are then, what would you hope happened?

Jeff Kelly:

To become the master of the entire known universe!

Jeremy Lesniak:

What would your second goal be?

Jeff Kelly:

The goal in martial arts-wise is to come up with a studio that is an all-in-one, multi-discipline type school. Personally, I practice both Chen t'ai chi ch'uan which we could describe as yin and Filipino Martial Arts Pekiti-Tirsia Kali which is about as different as you can get. Chen t'ai chi ch'uan is about cultivation and maybe in 10 years, you can use these techniques. Pekiti-Tirsia is when you have to get into a fight tomorrow so the two complement each other. Pekiti-Tirsia would be yang and the reason I do them both is several reasons. One, Pekiti, you have to have partners. Chen, you can do by yourself but I find the two complement each other the way that Chen can develop power in the close range, I find is really beneficial to Pekiti-Tirsia and Pekiti-Tirsia's helped me learn some of these applications by having, we do all sorts of arm wristlocks and such and that helps me to look at some of the movements and go ok, right, this may be part of that movement or application so I find the 2 complement each other and when I can, I also teach Muay Thai because that's a lot of fun and as a self-defense, I think that's one of the best self-defense out there because you're hitting stuff all the time and being hit and a few proper Muay Thai techniques would usually end most conflicts so with my school, I would like to do that. I would want to teach Chen in all the complete aspects of the first form, the second form, the weapons, the 5 major weapons, pushing hands, applications and then going on to the new frame. I want to teach Pekiti-Tirsia. I haven't had any teacher in that in 30 years. Just recently went to a seminar in Los Angeles that Dan Inosanto school and made a pilgrimage to that now famous place and had a seminar with [01:06:49] and try to improve my abilities there. I'd like to teach Muay Thai. I think there's a lot of appeal, especially with young kids. I would like to add Italian fencing. My wife's a fencing master of the Italian fencing school. I'd like to add Coreeda, Australian Wrestling. Very little known art, art of the aboriginal culture that has been revived and it turns out there's a guy here in Corvallis that knows it. We haven't connected yet but I'd like to do that. Pencak Silat, any kind of rare and unusual martial art, I would like to have all under one roof. Now, unfortunately, this is a fairly small town, a fairly small population so it's going to be more difficult but, as they say, if you build it, they will come and so, I want to spread that martial arts lifestyle and give people something other than the taekwondo down the street, traditional things. The catchphrase I'm starting to use in my social stuff is that martial arts are for life and that has two meanings. Marital arts for life is something that you do for the rest of your life if you have the right situation, the right teacher, the right art and martial arts is for life. They are to make



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your life better and certainly, I haven't made a lot of money at martial arts but they have been the thread throughout my life and now, at the age of 61, I'm starting to teach again. I never had a school before. I would teach here and there but now, we have a studio. We're renting space in a nice studio and developing more students so it took me 59 years to finally have the confidence to start teaching others so it's been, I lost about 17 years of my life so now, it feels really good to get back to where I should be now. You had my teacher Tom Bisio on the show way back when.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, episode 98.

Jeff Kelly:

I know! Good for you. When I was in New York, I told myself, to be successful in life, in martial arts, I should do whatever Tom does and it took that long, 35 years, to finally get to that point so he's not doing Filipino Martial Arts anymore but that's part of who he is and was. Now, I'm doing internal martial arts like him. Not Bagwa but Taichi. He's an acupuncturist and I have gone through acupuncture school and he's an expert in Qigong and I have specialty certificate in medical Qigong and finally, it has come full circle. Just as an aside, a fascinating thing that just happened. Corvallis has a population size of about 60,000 people and when I was in New York, I had a training partner and we really trained all the time and we hung out together and he moved and I lost track of him and so, a couple weeks ago, we were having a class and this gentleman walks through the door and hey, I would like to watch a class and I go up to introduce myself and he looks at me and says Jeff? It's Sid and it's my training partner.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Oh my. Completely random?

Jeff Kelly:

Yeah, and I screamed like a teenage girl and hugged him so hard we almost went to the ground. Out of nowhere and turns out, he was born and raised here and moved back about 3 years ago.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Oh, that's a riot. That's beyond coincidence. If you were to calculate the math required, there is a reason there as far as I'm concerned.

Jeff Kelly:

In Buddhism, we say it's karma and yeah, I think just having him here, and he hasn't practiced in 35 years although I keep telling him he'll get it back. He's getting it back really quick but just having him here, I think will be a tipping point in a positive way. Not that we have advanced students but just that can happen, then hopefully, other people can find us.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely and if people do want to find you, there's a segue that I couldn't have planned any better that I just ruined by calling attention to it but I was really excited for it, if people want to find you, website, social media, email, any of that; how would they do so?

Jeff Kelly:

Our website is www.xilinmartialarts.com and if I can just mention the name Xilin, it's unusual and people would call it by the city, Northwest Martial arts or something. I thought I could call it Kelly martial arts but that sounds more like an Irish bar.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I would go to that bar. It sounds like a great bar!

Jeff Kelly:

Yeah, watch MMA fights but I went with Xilin for 2 reasons. It translates as western forest, xi lin, so to me, that kind of represents the northwest where we are and the other thing is that it sounds like shaolin. The lin is the same forest and shao means small and xi means western and so, to me, it has kind of a similar sound so that's my way of honoring shaolin. I definitely would not have the hubris to call my school shaolin even though I do have a scroll that Shirfu signed and that gives me permission to teach shaolin martial arts so I have pretty good pedigree there but calling my school shaolin is a little presumptuous so, to honor Shirfu and the shaolin temple, I call it xilin or XMA for the millennials. The website there and social media, is @xilin. In YouTube, we tried to put together a number of tutorials in Pekiti-Tirsia, in Chen t'ai chi ch'uan and general Qigong and then on Instagram and Facebook, @xilinmartialarts. If they didn't get the spelling of Xilin, they should be able to find it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And, of course, if anybody gets stuck, we'll link all of the stuff at the show notes so no worries there. This has been great. This has been quite the ride. We went on a bunch of different directions and that's my favorite thing about this show but I want to close it up now so you listen to the show and you know we do this almost every single time. What parting words would you give to the folks listening?

Jeff Kelly:

I would say that the guiding principle for me, and I did get this from Tom as well, is to be open-minded, to learn and share. A lot of martial artists are so involved in what they do that they can't see anything else and Tom would always have seminars with anybody. Other styles of Filipino Martial arts, dirty boxing, internal martial arts and I've tried to carry that through going to seminars, ninjutsu, going to Wing Chun and Muay Thai and all those things and for me, the idea is that the tide raises all boats so I have no problem promoting other schools. I like to do that and perhaps, I'll even get around to doing



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that in a podcast of interviewing the martial artists in this community because I think it makes it better and there's so many martial arts that they're not for everybody and the individual martial artist, not necessarily the right one for you, so by being open-minded, you can find the right one and then, when you have your art, your core art, by being open-minded and trying other things, it can add to your own experience and basically, it's the Jeet Kune Do concept of Bruce Lee, of having a core art and studying others from beginning to end and adding that to your personal style so I would like people to be open-minded and share what they learned and not keep it for themselves. The real benefit of studying in America versus overseas is overseas, they tend to be really stingy with the information they give out. In America, we pay dues and we expect to be given the whole thing so, we have an incredible opportunity today, especially too with YouTube and other social media to see a variety of martial arts. When I have the student base for it, I'm going to bring in whoever I can find to do seminars and even if you didn't follow it. I did Wing Chun. I'm not a Wing Chun guy but I learned a lot from it. You had Stephen Hayes on here, I had a seminar with him when he was just starting. He was very eye-opening. I'm not going to do ninjutsu but I got to meet Stephen and meet him again a few years ago and that is really benefitted me as a martial artist so be open-minded. Try things. You don't have to give up what you're doing. It doesn't mean that what you're doing is less than anything else but all those things can add to your life, your experience and your martial arts career.

Jeremy Lesniak:

See what I mean? This guy has been on an interesting path. I mean, there's just stuff going on there that I never would've imagined and I don't know. I keep coming back to this idea that it feels like his life came out of a martial arts movie and I don't say that disparagingly. That's not at all how I mean it and I mean that genuinely and I'm jealous so Mr. Kelly, thank you so much for coming on the show. I appreciate your time. I had a great time talking with you. If you want to find out more, if you want to check out photos and links and all that good stuff, go to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. If you haven't signed up for the newsletter, you should do that too. That continues to grow. We keep putting more and more into it and that website is the easiest place to sign up for it and if you're down to support everything that we're doing and I hope you are, couple ways you can do that. You can visit the store at whistlekick.com. Use the code `PODCAST15` to save 15% or you can leave a review, you can buy a book on Amazon or help with the Patreon, Patreon.com/whistlekick. Our social media is whistlekick and my email is jeremy@whistlekick.com. That's it! Thanks for your time today. Until our next episode, train hard, smile and have a great day!