



Episode 490 — Dr. Sanko Lewis | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



#### Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey there! Welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio. This is episode 490 with today's guest, Dr. Sanko Lewis. Who am I? I'm Jeremy Lesniak, whistlekick founder and host for this show and everything we're doing at whistlekick is in support of the traditional martial arts. If you're interested in what we're doing to that end, visit [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). That's our online home, that's the place to find our store and everything else that we're doing and the code PODCAST15 is going to get you 15% off every single thing that we have there. Our podcast has a website all on its own and that's [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com). We release 2 brand new shows every week and our goal here at whistlekick and with this show is to connect, educate and entertain traditional martial artists throughout the world. If you want to show your appreciation for what we do, you can do a number of things. You can make a purchase, share an episode, follow us on social media. We're @whistlekick everywhere you can think of. You can tell a friend, you could pick up one of our books on Amazon. You can leave a review or you could support us on Patreon, [Patreon.com/whistlekick](http://Patreon.com/whistlekick). Patreon's a place where we post exclusive content and if you contribute as little as \$5 a month, you'll get access. Now, here we are knocking on episode 500 and you might think that you've heard it all. Sometimes I think I've heard it all but today, we have something that just completely came out of left field for me and that's not a bad thing. Dr. Lewis came on to talk about himself and his journey and I could tell pretty early that this was a very thoughtful, contemplative man and so when I asked him to talk about philosophy and martial arts, he just went with it. We talked about things specific to his style of taekwondo, we talked about things that are more broadly applicable in the



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martial arts. We talked about a lot and we're already discussing having him back. It was a phenomenal episode and I hope you enjoy it. Dr. Lewis, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

**Sanko Lewis:**

Good day. I'm glad to be on.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Thanks for coming on especially as late as it is there. This is one of the challenges of doing an international show is we all have to figure out what time zones and find times that it's not too late one place and not too early in another place. You've been quite accommodating.

**Sanko Lewis:**

For me, I'm a night owl so 11 PM which is now at my end is relatively early.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Where are you?

**Sanko Lewis:**

I live in Seoul, South Korea.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And let's just call a spade, a spade. If people go to your website, your social media, our website for the show notes and something, they see a picture of you, you might not be what they would expect from someone who's come on a martial arts show from South Korea. We would, I think statistically, expect someone who is Korean but you and are were talking a little bit before. You are not Korean. I'm guessing, there is a story of how you ended up in Korea.

**Sanko Lewis:**

Yes, quite an interesting story and it's very much related to the martial arts so I am South African and I started doing martial arts as a teenager. Actually, my brother and I really loved Kung Fu movies so we used to watch Jet Li, Jackie Chan, those types of movies and we wanted to do Kung Fu but in our hometown, we couldn't find any Kung Fu school or even in the neighboring towns and then, one day we saw a newspaper clip for taekwondo. We had no idea what it is but it had this tag like in the movie Best of the Best which we have seen so we go, oh, that looks cool. We like the movie, let's go try it out and that was about 25 years ago and then I went off to university, studied, eventually got my master's degree and by that time, I was already maybe 3<sup>rd</sup> degree black belt in ITF taekwondo and I don't know how familiar the listeners are with ITF Taekwondo but the forms in ITF have very particular names. Each form is named after a Korean historical figure or some Korean philosophical idea and so on so as you



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progress through the belts, you get to know a lot about Korea, Korean history, Korean philosophy, Korean heroes so of course, I became quite enamored with Korea and when I finished my master's degree, I thought you know what? I am tired of studying now. I want to earn some money to start with and see what Korea is about so I came to Korea and worked as an English teacher for one year. I didn't like teaching English but I did like Korea but I left. I went back to South Africa with the intention of pursuing a PhD. I was there for 1 year working as an assistant lecturer, part time, at the university trying to get this PhD and then I got this job offer at the university in Seoul so I took the job, I came back to Korea. That was about nearly 12 years ago so I've been back now for almost 11 and a half years around and I eventually did do a PhD but not back in South Africa. I ended up doing it here in Korea.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

We've had a number of people come on who started training in a martial art and then ended up moving to that country. People who trained in karate and moved to Japan, or kung fu and moved to China and now, taekwondo moving to Korea. When we talk about a martial art that has a historical home, certainly taekwondo has its home in Korea, I would imagine as someone who's never been there that you get to have an even better understanding of that martial art. You talked about the forms in ITF and I train in ITF so I'm familiar with these forms and yeah, the definitions, as at least we call them in high school, teach you a lot about Korean history and philosophy. Am I correct in assuming that your understanding of Korean, not just history and philosophy but also taekwondo expanded just by living there?

**Sanko Lewis:**

Firstly, you are correct but I had whole kinds of preconceived ideas about Asia, Eastern Asia, about Korea so I expected Korean people to be wearing traditional dress because this is the imagery that I just had in my mind from learning about all these historic figures and if you go to a library and you get a textbook about Korea, especially like 30 years ago when I did that, you see pictures of people in traditional dress and of course, it was nothing like that when I got here so there were lots of preconceived ideas that I had which I had to get rid of and then, on the other hand, there's definitely something about learning the culture that enhances your understanding of the martial art. One thing is the language. I am not fluent in Korean but I get by and knowing the taekwondo terms in the Korean terms, it actually expands your understanding of the technique because some of the techniques are just badly translated into English but when you understand the original word for a technique then you get a completely different layer of understanding and appreciation which I think people don't get otherwise.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Can I put you on the spot and ask for an example?

**Sanko Lewis:**



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So, yes. In ITF taekwondo, we have this technique called reverse turning kick. Now, a turning kick is a roundhouse kick and usually, it's done with the front of the knee, the shin or the instep or the ball of the foot. In ITF taekwondo, we especially prefer with the ball of the foot so that's a turning kick but what is a reverse turning kick? Now, most people think that the reverse turning kick is a spinning heel kick but that is not the Korean term. In the Korean term, Bandae, translated to reverse in English actually means the opposite of so Bandae Dollyo Chagi or reverse turning kick is the opposite of a turning kick so if you were to kick, let's say, with the instep or the ball of the foot when you do this roundhouse kick, for a Bandae Dollyo Chagi, you will attack with the back of the foot, the heel so it doesn't mean a spinning heel kick as most people consider it. It actually means just a heel kick without the spin so of course, we often do it with a spin as well but that is not what the Korean term refers to so that's a very common mistake. In the ITF encyclopedia, we have this term reverse but there's actually 3 Korean terms used. For instance, we have the knife hand strike and we have a reverse knife hand strike and in that case, the Korean term is Deung Sonkal, Sonkal means hand and Deung means back so the back of the knifehand is what the Korean term refers to so the back of the knifehand but in English it's translated as the reverse knifehand and then, we have Bandae Dollyo Chagi which is the opposite of Dollyo Chagi. The opposite of a turning kick so that's another term that's translated into English as reverse but yeah, it means opposite of or inverse would probably be a better English word for that and then there's the like a reverse punch. A punch that's done with the fist, opposite to the leading foot and that's also another Korean term. There's some problems with the translation into English of these terms and we often confuse them so that's something that you definitely improve on or you freely learn interesting levels of interpretation which we completely miss just because of the language barrier.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And how quickly, when you arrived, I think you said you were a 3<sup>rd</sup> degree, 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan when you went so if you were a 3<sup>rd</sup> degree black belt in any martial art, assuming that language is a part of your training, you've got, at least you think, a pretty good understanding of these words and what they mean. How quickly did you realize that there were differences?

**Sanko Lewis:**

I started realizing that a little bit earlier, before I came to Korea. Just before I finished my master's degree, I already knew, I already had the intention of coming so there was this Korean lady at the university I worked at. Her husband started Theology there and so I approached her and asked if she could teach me some Korean because I have this intention of going to Korea and so, when I started learning Korean and I could read Korean, because actually learning the Hangeul, the Korean alphabet is relatively easy so, as soon as I started doing that, I started noticing the discrepancies between the Korean and the English so even before I came to Korea that I noticed the things I thought I knew is quite different and then coming to Korea and having a Korean instructor to talk to, it became very clear quite early on that a better understanding of the language will help me a lot to understand the martial arts which is interesting, by the way, because taekwondo is quite a literal technical martial art in the sense



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that there are not very symbolic terminology for techniques. There's no pulling the dragon's tail or grasping the beach or anything like that. our terminology in taekwondo is quite straightforward but nevertheless, there's still layers of language that can be lost through translation and bad translation as well.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Have you made any, I guess, efforts to help others, maybe people from the dojang that you came from in South Africa, have you shared this information with them?

**Sanko Lewis:**

Yeah, I have a blog. I was quite a prolific writer on the blog at some point. I still write posts every so often but not as often as I used to but, any case, I have written several posts on the blog about this language problem. The blog actually started when I came, just before I came to Korea. I had my dojang in South Africa and I wanted to share with my students things that we don't get time for in the dojang and then, also my experiences abroad. That's what it started out as but it very soon became more a blog about taekwondo and Korean martial art technique and philosophy so to answer the earlier question, I do try to help people with the language and I'm part of some Facebook groups about the study of taekwondo where I also share my knowledge of the language. Now, I must say I am not a fluent speaker but as far as taekwondo goes, my vocabulary is relatively decent.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I think we're starting to hone in on a theme here. We've talked about philosophy in the understanding, the academic side of martial arts and I've cheated a little bit, of course. I delved a little bit more about you and the listeners might know at this point but I'm getting the sense that the why of things is something that really matters to you and probably drives what and how you train today.

**Sanko Lewis:**

Yes, definitely. When I started doing, not started but during my training as an ITF taekwondo practitioner and you start to compare your movements with other martial arts, let's say with karate and then, why do ITF practitioners move in this peculiar way compared to Karate and taekwondo? It's a derivative of karate that came out of karate but we move in a very unusual way so at first, it was this circular motions that grabbed my attention and I was curious about these weird circular motions we have in taekwondo. For instance, in karate when you throw a punch, the punch comes directly from the hip to the target which may be solar plexus high but when we do a punch in the traditional way in ITF taekwondo, that's not where the punch comes from. First, you relax. The fist has not moved forward from the hip and then we kind of pull it back in this arc all the way to the chest even and from there, we propel the punch forward in this interesting circular fashion and I was fascinated with these circular motions so when I came to Korea the first time, I decided Hapkido is a martial art full of circular motions,



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I should go do hapkido and thankfully, at the time, when I started there was another foreigner who was already black belt. I can't remember what his rank was at the time, maybe probably already a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> Dan and he had also practiced in ITF taekwondo and he could teach Hapkido to me or the principles in Hapkido to me using the vernacular of ITF taekwondo which really helped me to understand the style and it gave me a sense of what's behind some of these circular motions but there was another movement that I couldn't figure out and it's this bounciness we have in ITF taekwondo called sine wave motion or knee spring motion and I decided you know what? There's another Korean martial art that has a similar bounce and Taekkyon and I want to go train in Taekkyon so I went there and with the sole purpose of trying to understand this bouncy motion and after training in Taekkyon for some while, I realized that in Korean dance, traditional dance, there's a similar type of up and down movement, bending of the knees movement so I started doing Korean dance, and all of it was in an attempt to understand ITF taekwondo better and this might go into some of my current research as a martial artist and as a martial arts scholar so I don't know if you want to talk more about my PhD first which is related to martial arts or shall we continue talking about this interesting movement theory in taekwondo?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'm contemplating how to switch gears or how to continue this? There we go. Sorry, I just lost my window. When we talk to people who veer off and train in other things, they talk about how their first martial art helps them understand their second martial art which you just talked about and how their second martial art helps them understand their first martial art. Could you talk about how your hapkido training impacted your taekwondo?

**Sanko Lewis:**

Yes, hapkido is interesting in that, you know hapkido and taekwondo basically covers the same, especially ITF taekwondo, basically covers the same material so in hapkido, it's focusing on throwing techniques and joint locks but it also has kicks and punches and block and the same with taekwondo. In taekwondo, we have the kicking and punching and blocking but we also have these other techniques. The throws, the joint locks; some dojang actively trains and others do not but hapkido and ITF taekwondo is very much sister of martial arts and they share a lot of commonality but there's a difference in emphasis. In hapkido, the throwing and joint locks; in taekwondo, the striking. So, training in hapkido helped me to better understand this part of ITF taekwondo is sometimes not fully practiced. Now, thankfully, when I was really small, I did some judo under my father who used to teach judo so I was already somewhat exposed to break falls, throwing and some joint locks but I wouldn't say that I was a martial artist at the time. I just did it because it was a good way to spend some time with my dad but doing hapkido helped me to get a sense of, a little bit more of a philosophy sense. In ITF taekwondo, we don't focus much on the philosophical. There's sections in taekwondo which we call moral culture so these are kind of moral teachings from East Asia but it's not really philosophical in the sense that it's not trying to help you understand the movement from any philosophical framework which is different in hapkido. In hapkido, you do kind of have a sense of Eum yang. Eum Yang is the Korean for Yin Yang so



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hapkido has that sense of Eum Yang where you're in the negative space receiving space when the attacker comes and then you would redirect that force and create a yang, a positive energy, something like that so this helped me understand. In ITF taekwondo, we have the same thing where there's this moment at the start of a technique where you relax, you drop your body weight, your mind becomes focused and then, the movement initiates from this space or stillness so this was not something I think I grasped as intensely before I started doing hapkido and then, there were some other philosophical ideas in hapkido about the circle keeping the flow and it was through that that I could better understand the sine wave movement in taekwondo. The sine wave, scientifically speaking, is a derivative of a circle. It's plotting the points on a circle over time. That is what the sine wave is and in hapkido, you have all these circular motions so when I made that connection between, ok, the sine wave is actually just this circle principle applied differently, applied over a longer space, applied over time, it really helped me to understand taekwondo better. Particularly, ITF taekwondo because we have this sine wave concept in our movements.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'm wondering if you might unpack that sine wave concept for a moment because anyone who's trained in ITF, at least had seen it, it's pretty core to the way things are done but the direct violation, I guess, of what is taught in many other martial arts. In fact, I'm not aware of sine wave being taught in that formalized way. You could graph it, hence, sine wave. I'm not familiar with any other martial art that teaches movement in that way and so I'm wondering if some of the listeners who aren't familiar with ITF may be feeling a little lost right now.

**Sanko Lewis:**

How I explain it might be different from other instructors' interpretation of it but I will explain it from my understanding and my understanding is very much influenced by living in Korea and studying Korean philosophy but let's start with a normal sitting stance punch or a horse riding stance punch. In a typical sitting stance punch, as you would try in karate or even shaolin kung fu, the person will be in a very wide stance. Their center of gravity lowered and from that, they would pretty much keep their body, center of mass still and punch and the power of the punch would most likely be derived from just turning the hip. In the case of karate, shaolin Kung Fu sometimes, especially as it's practiced these days, wushu would just use the arms so it's very much just a musculature creating the force for the punch. In ITF taekwondo, when you do that same technique, suddenly we are doing a few phases to the technique. The first most important thing would be start with relaxation and so, many people when they think of the sine wave motion, they have these 3 phases of relax, rise and then, throw or fall or execute the technique and it's only really, the technique only starts after you've relaxed so this is the first part. So, you have to relax into or sink into this place of focused relaxation and it's important for it to be a focused relaxation. It's not just going limp and having no focus. It's almost a meditative act in that sense and then, from there we would launch the movement so the second part of a typical sine wave moment would be to create potential energy so we do that by lifting the center of mass and from there, we'll go



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into the 3<sup>rd</sup> part which is to convert that potential energy or the body mass into the kinetic energy so we basically throw the weight of the body using gravity and using our musculature like hip rotation or whatever the technique might require forward towards the targets so these are the 3 phases. We relax, we rise and then, we throw the technique using our body and this has a scientific reasoning behind it and it's very simple. It's mass times acceleration so we lift our body mass up and then we accelerate our body mass towards the target. Now, if you think of these 3 things, you actually do find them in many martial arts. When you talk to a boxer, they will tell you how they kind of drop their weight into the punch or if you think of a judo player, first they go and they lower their center of gravity under the opponent and then they lift them up rising and then they throw them back to the floor and even though, other martial arts don't necessarily formalize these 3 phases, we do find this idea in several martial arts. I can think of Xing Yi, one of the Chinese internal martial arts where they actually describe their movement as controlled falling and that's pretty much what we do as well so when we punch, we kind of fall forward with our whole body weight but in a very controlled manner and hit the target with the force of the whole weight of the body, not just the arm in isolation so the sine wave movement is both a technical concept, a way to create power, but it's also a cultural concept and we can talk a little bit about that momentarily but I want to say that this whole idea of sine wave movement is a very beginner level concept. It's a way for us to teach the beginner a certain principle of movement and we don't have to be stuck to this relax, rise, down formula. Some techniques require us just to go up. Sometimes, we are already in a high position so we would just drop the weight down so it really depends on the technique or in a case by case scenario but just as a teaching aid, we have this idea of a sine wave and I mean, even the term sine wave is a little bit of a misnomer because what we are doing is a cosine wave. First going down then up and down but any case, that's the term that we inherited which is interestingly not the term used in the Korean texts so that's another language barrier.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'd love for you to expand on that if you're willing to. You said that there's more that we can go into. I mean, you're explaining sine wave better than anyone's ever explained this to me so I'm enjoying this.

**Sanko Lewis:**

On my blog, I've written numerous articles, essays over the years about this sine wave concept but it's just kind of as I get to understand it better. 2 things: lets quickly talk about the Korean term. In Korean, the term used is back of the bow so a sine wave is the shape of the wooden part of the bow so not the string part so it's basically just the curved thing and it's clearly meant as a metaphor because it's contrasted with other types of shapes in the ITF taekwondo encyclopedia. One of the shapes is sawtooth shape, so very jagged motions and we should not do jagged motions. That's the one big no-no and the other big no-no is not to keep your body completely stationary as you move completely without any up and down movement so in ITF taekwondo, we allow for or maybe even encourage a type of soft flowing or sine wave kind of movement, a wave in essence. Why exactly the founder of ITF taekwondo decided on the term sine wave for the English translation, I don't know. It might have been to make it sound





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more scientific for western audience but yes, that's not the term used in the Korean version of the ITF encyclopedia. Now, for the other point, I mentioned that the sine wave motion has this technical aspect but it also has a cultural aspect to it and this is something I learned when I started doing, first, taekkyeon. Taekkyeon is a traditional Korean martial art. It's often described as a folk martial art in part because it's done to the folk music, to the traditional music and it was a game that people would do at folk festivals, at traditional Korean festivals during certain festivities like the thanksgiving holiday, Chuseok, or the lunar new year holiday, Seollal. So during those holidays, towns would compete against each other practicing these folk martial arts. Taekkyeon being one of them and Ssireum, which is a wrestling style being the other so I started doing Taekkyeon because I noticed that they also have this interesting up and down movement. I, of course, don't call it sine wave. I have a different term for it but I wanted to know why do they do it, what's behind it? I soon came to realize, very early on when I came to Korea and watching Korean dance, traditional dance, they do the same thing so I really wanted to understand this Korean body culture so that's kind of what I mean by the sine wave has a cultural aspect. It's a very cultural way of moving. Now, there are many different ways of tackling this concept but let's stay with Taekkyeon for a moment. In Taekkyeon, when they do their basic stepping, it's called pumbalkki and it's a kind of a 3-step basic movement so imagine you are standing on a triangle so your feet are parallel, shoulder-width apart and your both feet are on the base of a triangle and then, so there's in front of you is the pointy bit, the upper point of the triangle, upper angles so in Taekkyeon, you would step with one foot on that front point of the triangle and then, bring your foot back and then, put the other foot on that front point and this is kind of called pumbalkki where you step from one point to the other point. Pumbalkki is based on the pum which is a Korean character. It's this 3 shapes like you have a triangle and on each corner of the triangle there's a little box so you have these boxes arranged in this triangular shapes so that's where the pum comes from and Balkki just means kind of stepping with the foot. They do this interesting stepping on this triangular shape and each time they shift the weight, the knee bends and this knee-bending in ITF taekwondo, we call knee spring. The knee spring motion and this knee spring motion results in a sine wave or wave like stepping. Now, in Taekkyeon, they have another term for this knee-bending and it's ogeum jil so ogeum jil is basically a term that describes the inside of a joint. Ogeum is like the back of the knee or the inside of the elbow joint and jil basically means movement so ogeum jil is basically moving a joint in that way so bending the knee as you step and they do this kind of bouncing motion in a very interestingly instinctive way and Koreans, when you ask them about this, oh, it's natural and for us, westerners, it's not natural to be stepping and bouncing in this way but in the Korean mindset, it's a natural movement and that's also why you find that in the ITF encyclopedia, it refers to the sine wave movement as a natural motion. For people that are not Korean, it's probably not a natural way of moving but for them, it's very much, it's part of their culture and in Korean dance, they have the same type of movement and it's also called ogeum jil. There's various other terms for it. One of the terms that they use is goo shin and goo shin means the expanding and contracting of something so extending the knees and then bending the knees, that is goo shin and in Korean dance, you see goo shin, not only in the knee. You see it all throughout the body. This play between extending and contracting and of course, if you really start to analyze the martial arts,



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that's what the martial arts is about. It's this extending and contracting all the time. That's how you do techniques so there's very much this cultural element. This cultural DNA that forms part of this whole idea of sine wave movement and I think it was on purpose. On the one hand by the founder of ITF taekwondo but it also was a very subconscious thing by the Korean people whose trained in karate early on so when taekwondo formed, it was like in the late 1940s, early 1950s and 60s and 70s, that was the time that taekwondo really developed and it was based on Japanese karate. Now, karate moves completely differently. There's definitely no bounce in the knees as you step from one basic technique to another. It's considered completely bad technique to go up and down. Your head should be stable throughout your movement but the Koreans very early on started to spar and bounce as they spar so it's a very different way of thinking and I don't think they were doing it with any technical contemplation. At first, they did it because they were Korean. It's just the way Koreans move and then, general Choi was the first president of ITF taekwondo and the principal founder of taekwondo. He had a political agenda to make taekwondo less karate and more Korean so I think, for him, it was a conscious decision to move in a way that reflects Korean body culture rather than a Japanese body culture.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's interesting stuff and you see a little bit of that history in the book, *A Killing Art* from [Alex Gillis](#). I don't know if you've read that book.

**Sanko Lewis:**

Yes, yes. It's definitely one of my favorite books. Mr. Gilles has more of the political opinion that General Choi changed the martial art for political reasons to differentiate what he was doing from what other Koreans were doing that also used this name taekwondo to identify their martial art and probably that is true but I definitely think he also changed it particularly to make it more Korean and he explicitly says in one of his writings, this is General Choi, he explicitly said that he wanted to make a Korean martial art and I think his inclusion of this concept of knee spring and the sine wave motion was definitely an act in that direction making the body culture, changing the DNA into a Korean DNA rather than Japanese because we can still see some vestiges of karate or Korean-Japanese movement especially if you look at older types of taekwondo and taekwondo groups that broke away like in the 70s that broke away from the main either ITF taekwondo or WT taekwondo groups. If you look at the way they perform their forms, it's karate. They are doing karate. Maybe doing the steps of ITF pattern, ITF form but the way they do it is a Japanese way, not a Korean way and I can give an example maybe of the aesthetic of this. So, already we have an idea of up and down movements and in Korean dance, that would be called verticality. This notion of going up and down and it might have a philosophical underpinning. This is kind of my conjecture based on Korean philosophy. In Japanese philosophy, if you look at the Yin Yang symbol, it's a black and white symbol and it's specifically without color because they want to convey this yin and yang idea in the most broad terms. Male, female, night and day, hard, soft and so on but if you look at the Korean version of the same symbol, the taeggeuk-do which you can see on the south Korean national flag, it is in colors. It's red and blue so it's not quite a black and white yin yang symbol but it's



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this interesting red and blue Eum Yang and these colors have very particular symbolic meanings. The red represents heaven or chon and blue represents the earth, ji and as an ITF practitioners, you already know chon-ji is the first pattern we do and it means creation. Now that you understand that it refers to heaven and earth and you get this idea that in the Korean mindset, the yin yang, the eum yang is a vertical concept. It's an interplay between what is above and what is below between up and down and this might be part of, or at least it might be one way to interpret this up and down notion, this knee-bending notion that we see in Korean dance, traditional Korean martial arts but something else I want to talk about is maybe the rhythm. I already mentioned that taekkyeon steps on a 3-beat rhythm or they step in this triangular fashion which is a 3-beat rhythm. Now, this 3-beat rhythm is the basic rhythm of traditional Korean music and in ITF taekwondo, we have the same sense. Our basic stepping happens in a 3-beat. Relaxed, rise and execute; the technique for relax, rise so that's one cultural aspect. Another interesting thing is a notion of curved lines being beautiful so in Korean aesthetics, there's this idea that a natural curve and they call it natural, I don't know why but the natural curved line, maybe the natural curved lines of the mountains in the distance is inherently beautiful which is quite different from what we see in Japan. Japan, which has Shintoism as a worldview, they have a different aesthetic concept. They conceive of beauty as a straight line so if you look at traditional outfit, the kimono, Japanese outfit, you will notice that the cuts has these very straight lines where the sleeves are very linear. The whole cut of the outfit is linear. If you look at traditional outfit of Koreans, the hanbok, you notice that the sleeves, the bottom of the sleeves has a curved line to it so, for Koreans, there's an inherent idea of a curvature that is beautiful and natural so this brings us back again to the sine wave stepping where the ITF encyclopedia says sine wave is a natural movement and it's a naturally wavy or curvy movement. That is very much a Korean cultural concept. The same with karate, people often think of the reason why the karate punch comes from the hip straight to the target is purely, what's the term, strategic because the shortest distance between 2 points is a straight line but it could very much be purely aesthetic reason not a strategic reason because in Japanese thinking, in Shinto thinking, a straight line is a good line and when I say a good line, I mean it in a moral sense. For Shintoism, they don't have this concept of sin that the West have inherited. For them, straight is good in aesthetic terms and a curved line or a crooked line is evil and so, the straight movement, straight punch or blocks with very angular lines in Japanese karate is it has definitely strategic advantage but it's probably more a cultural thing than what most people realize and we can notice this when we go to Okinawa. Okinawan karate, Okinawa is an island. It is less influenced by Shintoism and they also have less obsession with these straight lines so if you look at Okinawan karate or something like Gōjū-ryū karate, for instance, you notice many more curved or circular movement in the techniques than what you would find in mainland Japan.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

This is exactly what I was hoping we would get to and when we started talking in the beginning of the episode and I could tell that the philosophy meant so much to you. I was hopeful that we could get into some of these nuanced things and a comparison of the cultural influence on direction of motion. I



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wouldn't have fathomed at the beginning that we would go here but I'm so happy that we did. That was really cool and this is the stuff that you're exploring, the stuff that people would find on your blog?

**Sanko Lewis:**

Yes. A lot of this, especially these movement things is on my blog. I've, of course, grown in my understanding. There are things that I wrote 10 years ago I might not agree with anymore but a lot of this is on my blog.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

If people want to find that blog, where would they go?

**Sanko Lewis:**

It is a BlogSpot blog ran by Google so the name is [blogspot.com/sooshimkwan](http://blogspot.com/sooshimkwan) or if they just go to my personal website, there's links to my blog. My personal website is my name, [sankolewis.com](http://sankolewis.com).

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And we'll certainly link all that stuff from the show notes page in our website. I want to send people over because this is fascinating conversation. A couple more things as we start to head out, I always like to turn the clock ahead. If we look forward, if we look into the future, what are you hopeful for with your training or expecting to see in your training? Do you have goals? Look out to the horizon and tell us what you see out there for you.

**Sanko Lewis:**

In ITF taekwondo, I'm not a 5<sup>th</sup> Dan. I was eligible to do my 6<sup>th</sup> Dan last year but I was too busy with other things including lots of research, including martial arts research to get to it. I am a 4<sup>th</sup> Dan in hapkido and I'm probably, time-wise, eligible to go for 5<sup>th</sup> Dan as well so there's no hurry for me but those are probably things that will happen. Mostly at the moment, my focus is still exploring this idea of Korean body culture, traditional body culture so that's where my head is at most of the time. Every so often, I take classes in Korean traditional music or Korean dance if time allows. I might do this again this coming semester and then, I'm pretty busy academically. Last year, if I remember correctly, I attended 5 academic conferences all related to taekwondo or martial arts from a completely academic perspective so these are not like workshop or seminars. It's more understanding the martial arts academically and the same for this year, there's probably 2 that I'm likely to go to and I'm busy writing some articles on different interesting aspects of the martial arts. A friend and I just submitted an article quite recently, maybe a week or 2 ago so hopefully that's published in a journal not too long from now. So those are my things. I tend to give seminars when opportunity arise. I just came back from South Africa. I spent just over a month there and I gave a taekwondo and hapkido seminar there for 2 days and maybe I'll do some of that this year and other places as well.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Cool. Shoot, I had something. I lost it. Where did it go?

**Sanko Lewis:**

Ok, I'll take a sip of water.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

By all means. Oh, there it is. Are there any books planned? You struck me as someone who would write a book.

**Sanko Lewis:**

I've been asked by several people or encouraged by several people that I should write a book on some of these stuff so I started, I have the outlines at least for 2 books. The one is on the sine wave motion or the wave motion trying to explore it from a philosophical perspective and a cultural perspective and then, a technical perspective because when you read these books about martial arts and the movement, it's always from a technical how to punch and block or throw somebody but my angle would be trying to understand these movements philosophically and culturally and then come to the technical aspect. What technical advantages does moving this way have over another way? So that's one thing I am working on. I don't have any deadline in mind by it's something I'm working on quite slowly and yeah, this whole idea of Korean body culture, I just recently finished an article for that and that might be published in a book with UNESCO. UNESCO is doing a book on intangible cultural heritage and these ideas of mine, these research of mine might fit in a chapter there. We'll see if it fits or not. In any case, so I kind of have the backdrop now for writing that book and then, something else I've done, I did a feature of a series of essays for a taekwondo magazine in which I spoke about the value of step sparring and of patterns and trying to understand how these things work within the ITF taekwondo pedagogy so that's possible another book in the making.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Good stuff, cool! I thank you for coming on. This has been, honestly, different than I had expected when we first scheduled but I don't mean that in any sense of a negative way. This has been utterly fascinating and I'm sure even if you're not an ITF practitioner, the depth that we went and relating it back to so many things in martial arts, I love when we do this.

**Sanko Lewis:**

Yeah, we did and we didn't even get to my PhD research which draws on a completely different topic but also martial arts related.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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We're going to have to have you back. We'd love to have you back and do Part 2.

**Sanko Lewis:**

I'd be keen to do that.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Awesome, awesome. I ask the guest every time to choose how they send us out whether that's some words of wisdom or closing thoughts, whatever you choose. How do you want to end this episode here?

**Sanko Lewis:**

I like this idea of Suhaeng. It's a Korean idea which we also find in Japanese culture of doing a discipline and this discipline teaches you something about life so doing like a tea ceremony or doing calligraphy painting but you can also do a martial art, a martial art as a discipline and I think most martial artists, lifelong martial artists, already know this intuitively but it's a good idea to know that it is an actual concept that you do this discipline and this discipline teaches you more than just kicking, punching, hitting, throwing, blocking. It teaches you about life, about the conflict in life, about finding harmony in life, about this ability to confront a danger because that's ultimately the thing that martial arts does best compared to all the other things. We can learn a body expression through dance. We can learn fitness through CrossFit. We can learn silencing the mind through meditation but martial arts is ultimately about a combative encounter and coming to the combative encounter was this sense of stillness, with the sense of this is just another hurdle in my life's journey. I think that's something martial artists have a unique grasp on this. There's an interesting book called Risk Failure Play about martial arts and dance and the author says that the martial arts is a microcosm of how to handle conflict in turn there's no conflict and I think that's something we can learn from martial arts is seeing it not just as a means to do combat but as a means to understand conflict in life and the hurdles in our own life and overcoming them. That's the philosopher in me coming out again.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

In the intro, I told you this was a bit of a different episode and hopefully, you agree. Different isn't bad and in this case, different was amazingly entertaining and informative and really gave me a lot of insight to some of the things that I've been practicing for years. How cool was that? Thank you for coming on, Dr. Lewis. I had a great time and look forward to our next conversation. If you want more, head over to [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com). Every episode has a page onto itself with links, photos, a transcript and sometimes even more. If you're up for supporting us in the work we do, we have a number of options. You can use the code `PODCAST15` to save 15% off in [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com) or leave a review, buy a book on Amazon, help out with the Patreon. That's [Patreon.com/whistlekick](http://Patreon.com/whistlekick) and I hope that if you see somebody out wearing something with whistlekick on it, you'll introduce yourself. This is starting to happen. I mean, hearing people talking about it and it makes me so happy. You know what else will make me



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happy? Hearing your guest suggestions so go ahead, write us, [jeremy@whistlekick.com](mailto:jeremy@whistlekick.com) is my personal email address and our social media, wherever you can imagine is @whistlekick. That's all for today, until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!