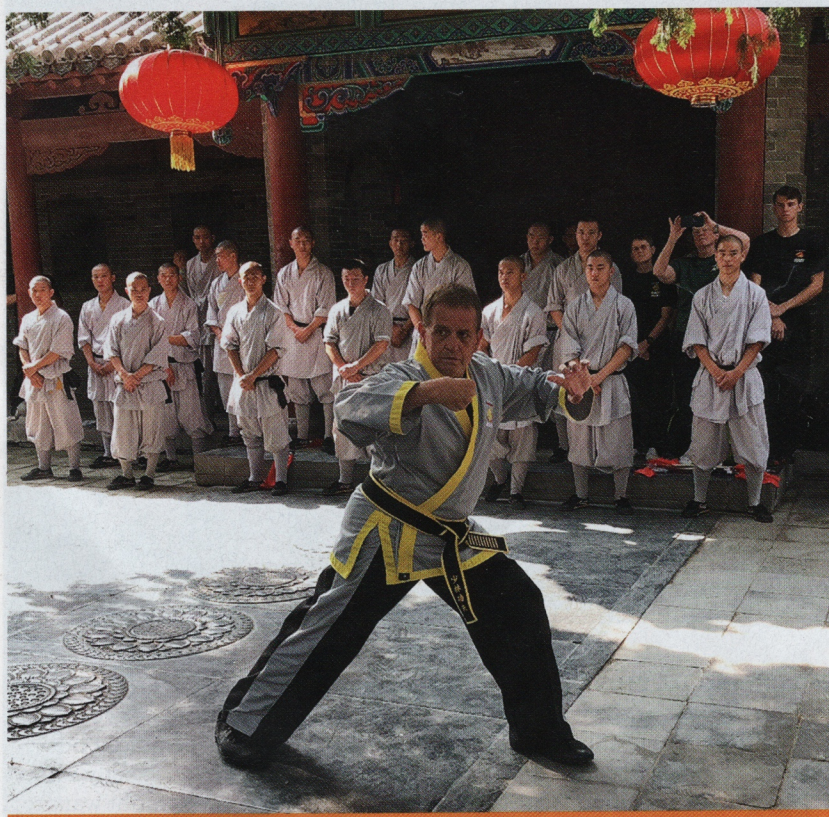


Inside Shaolin Temple

After spending several decades training under various Chinese grandmasters in the United States, I began visiting Shaolin Temple in Henan province, China, on a regular basis. Those visits have continued for the past 20 years. Every time I go, the abbot of Shaolin has me meet with a senior monk so I can continue to learn about the temple and its history. The information presented here comes from those meetings, as well as from observations I've made over the decades.

BY STEVE DeMASCO



BODHIDHARMA, WHOM THE Chinese call Tamo, did not build Shaolin Temple. It was already there when he arrived in the late fifth century or early sixth century. Nevertheless, the temple is now regarded as a national treasure by the Chinese and a World Heritage Site by the United Nations. What this means is the primary mission of any Shaolin monk is taking care of his fellow monks and disciples and maintaining the buildings that make up the temple.

To do that, he needs a certain

amount of fitness and strength, as well as above-average humility. He sweeps, cleans, repairs things that are broken and does other forms of manual labor. Physical exercise is a necessary part of his daily regimen, as are activities that develop the mind so he can concentrate for longer periods while studying Buddhist scriptures. Notice that I haven't mentioned kung fu yet.

The temple has quarters where the true monks, those who have dedicated their lives to Buddhism, live. The facilities used to be very crude, but they started making improve-

ments after interest in Shaolin skyrocketed and the tourism boom began. (Millions of people, most of whom are Chinese, come every year.)

With so many visitors, it's only natural that the public, martial artists included, have some mistaken beliefs about Shaolin. One is that all those who become monks join the temple when they're 3 or 4 years old. Yes, a boy can be accepted at that age — in which case he'll receive his general education there — but few follow that path. Most are accepted when they're adults, even adults who are married with children. Of course, they must give up their former life when they join because in Buddhism, striving toward a pure existence means being unattached to the mundane world.

The life of anyone who resides at Shaolin is all about earning one's way while striving to help others improve themselves. Often, that means living a life of sacrifice, which makes it no different from many other religions.

NOTICE THAT I STILL HAVEN'T discussed kung fu. That's because for a true Shaolin monk, life is not just about that. It's about being mentally in tune with oneself to reach the highest levels of Buddhism. Some Shaolin monks never even practice kung fu.

It's important to distinguish between monks, practitioners and disciples at Shaolin. Any child or adult who enters the temple will be given the opportunity to become a Shaolin practitioner or student, which means learning basic physical exercises along with Buddhism. Becoming a Shaolin disciple, which is when the kung fu training kicks in, is much more difficult.

If a practitioner demonstrates progress, aptitude and humility, he may be taken on by a master or a senior monk and become a disciple. Now he's like a son to the master, and the temple will always be his home. He will continue to learn the cultural and religious lessons needed to become a functioning member of the Shaolin community, along with kung fu. The whole time, the disciple has to keep up with his chores. Over time, he gains strength and humility — and his kung fu improves because of the daily training and the healthy, simple living.

SIDEBAR! I've trained with the same senior monk for 20 years, and I'm not a disciple. About three years ago, that senior monk told me he'd taken on a disciple after the young man, who happens to be a Buddhist, spent 10 years training and begging to be accepted.

PEOPLE AT SHAOLIN wake up early and eat a vegan breakfast. They consume no animal products, not even eggs. Their diet is mostly tofu, rice, vegetables and bread. They don't eat garlic because they regard it as an aphrodisiac, and they don't want to stimulate their bodies that way. Lunch and dinner are more of the same: rice, vegetables and tofu.

Those who live at the temple move their bodies all day long. The entry-level student does physical exercise and cleans. The disciple does that in addition to his martial arts training, which lasts late into the afternoon. His kung fu education starts with stances and footwork, then branches out to the Shaolin animals, especially the "personality" of each one

as it pertains to self-defense. He also begins learning the forms.

After dinner, everyone goes back to work, so to speak. Depending on his position, that might involve practicing calligraphy, studying Buddhism or fine-tuning a form.

EMPTY-HAND SKILLS and weapons constitute a large part of the kung fu training, but the curriculum also includes Shaolin martial culture and philosophy, *chi kung* and traditional Chinese medicine. All the senior monks are well-versed in these ancillary disciplines.

At times, the kung fu training of a disciple is as primitive as it looks in movies like 1982's *The Shaolin Temple*, which stars Jet Li. The disciple may lift heavy stones for strength development and walk on tree stumps for balance. Clearly, the monks like to keep things traditional.

On average, a disciple trains in martial arts between four and six hours a day. He starts right after breakfast and morning prayer. He pauses for lunch, then resumes practice. Approximately half his day is filled with martial arts and the other half with study.

A monk's day will start even earlier than a disciple's day. I don't know when each monk wakes up, but I know I've trained with some as early as 4 a.m. And I know their day isn't done until evening, which means they often put in 14-hour days.

SHAOLIN KUNG FU TRAINING falls into two categories, and they're closely linked to the forms that are practiced. "Old Shaolin" is composed of the traditional forms. There's none of the flashy aerial maneuvers we see in movies. Old Shaolin was developed to build the body and mind. It allows

the practitioner to do things most people cannot do, but that does not entail flying through the air.

Old Shaolin includes disciplines such as "head kung." In this, a monk practices hitting objects with his head and building his *chi* until he's capable of effecting breaks without injury. Another discipline is "jumping kung," in which a monk develops his ability to leap up (for example, out of a hole in the ground) and leap down (for example, off a rooftop). No, they can't jump onto a rooftop, but they can safely jump off them.

In contrast, "new Shaolin" is what the public knows. Having seen it — perhaps in a movie — people travel to the temple to train with instructors they believe are Shaolin monks. Much of this training takes place outside the temple grounds, and the teachers are "training monks" rather than true Shaolin monks. These training monks can do incredible things that involve jumping, spinning, punching, kicking and wielding weapons. They have shaved heads and wear monk's robes. In a way, the public is getting what it wants: a dose of acrobatic Shaolin kung fu, along with some history and philosophy. The majority leave satisfied.

However, those people are certainly not getting schooled in old Shaolin. Think about the logic of this for a moment. If you were in charge of a 1,500-year-old temple and its venerated fighting tradition, would you hand over your treasure to anyone who walked in and said he wanted to learn? ❧

Steve DeMasco was Black Belt's 1998 Instructor of the Year. His first book, *An American's Journey to the Shaolin Temple*, is available at blackbeltmag.com/store.

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