



Ancient Wisdom for Modern Times

Shaolin Master and Secular Monk Shi Xing Mi brings a unique blend of ancient wisdom and understanding of modern business life to his practice. Born Walter Gjergja, his path to Shaolin Master began at the age of just 13, when he attended a local Kung Fu class. He went on to complete an Economics degree and have an extremely successful corporate career, which he decided to give up to complete his Shaolin Temple education and spend his life training others and sharing his unique understanding of modern life.

First of all, what is a Shaolin Secular Monk?

It is someone who has taken the vow as a Shaolin Monk, but has decided not to live in the Monastery, but to go back into society. When you take the vows of the Shaolin, you can choose whether you want to live as a Monk or go back in to society and share the teachings into society. That was my choice, and so I live a secular life.

What brought Shaolin into your life? How did you discover it?

It's a little bit of a long story, perhaps it was karma, or destiny, or whatever you like to believe in. When I was 13, I was living in Italy and one of the first Shaolin Kung Fu Schools in Europe opened a few hundred metres from my home, which is a somewhat unusual circumstance, because I lived in a small town. But it just happened that one of the great teachers in Europe turned out to reside there.

I started studying there after school, like many kids would do, because it looked interesting and I was curious about it, and it became my main passion. Then, when I went to University, both my physical training, plus my growing interest in philosophy and culture, led me to look at the source of it. At the first opportunity I got I went to China and managed to be accepted into the Monastery, then, the rest is history as they say.

A lot of us know about martial arts, but there is a whole philosophy and way of thinking and way of being in Shaolin isn't there?

Absolutely, in fact the Martial Arts are actually a secondary aspect. The Shaolin Temple is the place where Zen was created. We know that Zen started as Chinese 'Chán' Philosophy which is the Chinese word for Zen. It's non-theistic, it's a mix of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism philosophies, which are fused into one overview of what makes us human. Of course, one of the components of who we are is the body. Martial Arts work the body in a very holistic way as well as stimulating the mind towards focus, concentration and mediation, but it's only a component of a much broader philosophical approach.

You must have had to work and study for a long time to become a Secular Monk?

Absolutely. I started training at 13 and I eventually graduated after 17 years of Shaolin study. But of course, the studying continues after that, so I keep going back to



the Monastery even now, to meet with my Master and my Brothers. In parallel, I also continued my education in other ways and studied Economics and Philosophy at University. The studies in economics led me to work in Consulting and then Management. So, I had a period of a conventional western career, before deciding to end it and focus on Shaolin.

You had a very successful corporate career, which you gave up to complete your Shaolin education. Was that a difficult decision? Do you do anything business-related now?

It was a very difficult decision, both economically, of course, as well as socially – my parents, my peers, found it kind of unusual, that at 30, after a very fast and successful corporate career (I was the youngest CEO of a limited company on the Australian Stock Exchange, as well as a Management Consultant) I decided to quit

Above left:
Training and meditation.

Above right:
TEDx Conference in Lugano,
Switzerland.



all that, complete my Shaolin studies, take my vows as a Shaolin Master and share this wisdom, mixed with my own life experience, in what I like to call "Ancient Wisdom for the Modern Times." I take my diverse work experience and the ancient wisdom of Shaolin and apply it to the modern needs.

You asked if I'm still involved in business? Well, I am because I apply a lot of it to business. Business people have many, many needs that range from personal needs like self-management and burn-out avoidance to a focus on their wellness as well as corporate needs – like change management, leadership, effectiveness and professional culture. So much of my teaching is involved within the corporate context. Although, philosophical teaching is not business teaching, I don't want to teach them the technical things, I teach them the behaviour.

Having worked in business must give you a unique perspective, a unique sympathy, with the people you are helping?

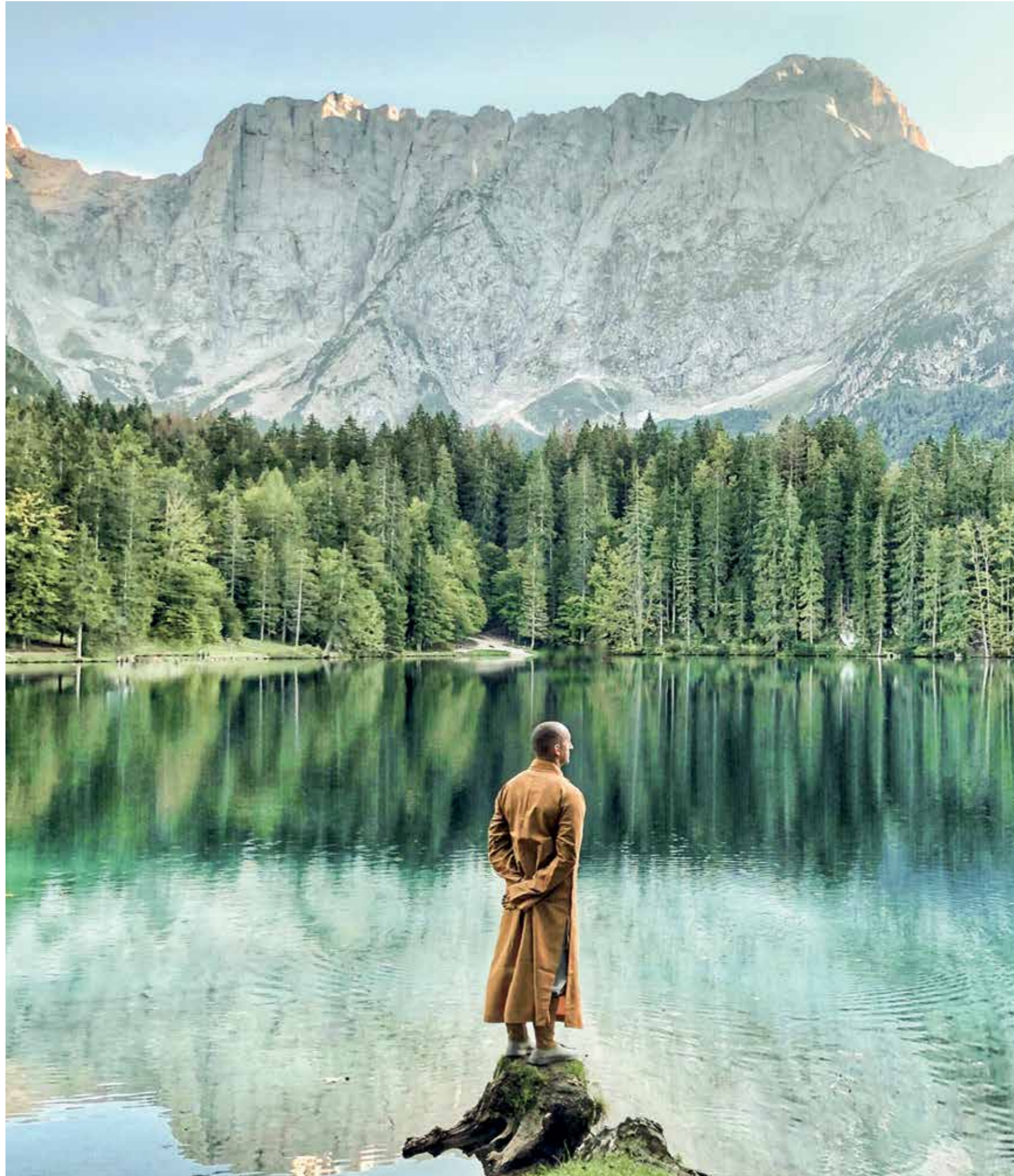
Yes, absolutely. I mean, the key thing is that it gives me an understanding of exactly what they need and how to explain the Shaolin approach to them. Shaolin is a culture that is 1,500 years old and so some of the teaching methods and some of the application methods are somewhat archaic, which does not mean they're ineffective, but it is an approach that is unmanageable in modern life. For example, you are taught one exercise for several months or years in isolation and this will give you a deep awareness. It is a very powerful method but it's simply inapplicable for 99.9% of people in modern life. My mission is to take the Shaolin key concept and draw on it in a way that people can get a very quick result in a manageable time frame within the constraints of modern life.

It does seem to be that the faster twenty-first century life gets, the more we need to stop and be still and take a breath, do you think that's where you're helping as well?

Absolutely. A Shaolin Master, like myself, can be called a Shaolin Wuseng – a Warrior Monk. What I like to say to people is that Warrior Monk is not just about Martial Arts and meditation, it's about the two energies that we require for everything during life and to achieve a kind of balance and mastery of life. The Warrior is the do-er, the go-getter and the Monk is the introspective, thinking part of us. If we are always in the Monk State, we never achieve anything, but if we are always in the Warrior State we burn out. In modern life we seem to be always in Warrior mode and the Monk needs us to relax, to feel what's going on. Some high-level business people and some professional sports people feel that any moment spent 'not doing' is a moment wasted. What I do is make them realise that the moment of 'not doing' made 'doing' much more effective and focussed and powerful. Think of something like a lack of sleep – there are people who think 'I must sleep for four hours a night because then I have more hours to be effective', but that lack of sleep makes your waking hours much more ineffective, so by sleeping six hours, you probably get more done than with four.

Tell me about your daily routine

My daily routine varies. If I am at home, I dedicate a substantial part of my daily routine to my own practice, but without taking away from my work, so I will practice early in the morning and late in the evening. In the middle part of the day I dedicate myself to preparing for teaching, writing articles, organising activities and so on. Sometimes



I'm travelling – I usually travel about 100-150 days a year, so when I'm travelling I try to integrate these activities into my daily life. But one thing to stress for your readers is that, at the beginning we need a routine, but when you achieve a kind of deep awareness, or mindfulness – to use a very modern term - you realise that every moment is a moment of training. Everything you think about, talk about, eat, drink, if you are walking, every action, how you are breathing, everything can be training. The key to any kind of self-mastery is simply to become deeply aware of your body, your mind, your emotions and all the elements that make up who we are. All the exercises I teach and all the techniques I teach in mindfulness, meditation, or whatever, are awakening a mastery that you already have inside you. I'm very much about empowering the person to become their own master.

What have been your proudest moments? In your Shaolin studies and practice?

For me, the most fulfilling moments are when I see some wonderful impact. For example, I worked with a businessman who had a stroke on his 50th birthday. He almost died and was unable to move or talk properly. The first time I saw him, he could not get up from his wheelchair. We started doing some visualisation and some very minimal movements from OiGong and now he is walking, he's going on vacation with his wife and he can speak enough to communicate with his children. This is just one example of something that gives meaning to my life and my work and mission. There are many others – for example the person who fell out of their game and came back and won a medal again, the businessman who was fully burned out and was damaging his work and personal relationships, and who, just with changing some habits and behaviours, healed his relationships and developed the business in new ways.

There is nothing greater in this life than to share something positive with others. Man is a social animal, we are interconnected with others. Of course, there is the exception of the hermit, but in a way, he is not contributing to life. If we decide to integrate in society and be connected to others, then there is no greater joy than to make a positive contribution, to share some love, to share some joy, to share some wisdom with others.

You must have moments when the stress of life affects you? Is there anything you do to bring yourself back to a peaceful state of mind if you've had a bad day?

Of course, I mean, you know, people think sometimes that a Master must live in the clouds somewhere and is isolated from any of life's daily things, but there is a very famous saying which is 'before enlightenment: chop

wood, carry water, after enlightenment: chop wood, carry water' – what it means is that any kind of enlightenment or wisdom won't actually change what you do, it changes your attitude to what you do. So, of course I have difficult situations and bad days and life problems, but what is important is to become aware of how you feel and how you react, and then learn to be in control – or at least understanding and acceptance – of your mind and your emotions. Then you can modulate your reactions in a way to obtain the best out of your situation, not the worst.

One of the first lessons is to learn to be an Action Person or an Accepting Person, because most situations fall into two categories: things which you can do something about and take action and change it, or things that you can do nothing about, those you have to accept, because you cannot control everything in life. These two behaviours can prevent agitation, but of course, we have to train our minds and that's what I try to tell people when they learn about mindfulness - you need to train your mind the same way that you would train your muscles. Nobody would expect to be able to run a marathon without having done running training, or to be able to do twenty pull-ups without having done some muscular training, so how you can expect to be able to control your mind- where it goes, what it thinks about, how it reacts to different techniques and different emotion – if you haven't trained?

You've said you travel for up to 150 days a year? Where are you heading over the next year or so?

I travel all round the world, but at the moment my activities are mostly Europe based, simply because that's where I have contacts. I also travel to Asia and America. But when there is the opportunity to share something in a country I will go there very gladly and connect with whoever has invited me or whoever has an interest in what I do.

How often do you get back to your Temple in China?

I usually go back once or twice a year. Once a year I take a group to have a kind of Cultural Experience, so I take them for a one-week retreat. I also go just to visit my Master and my Brothers for a week. Sometimes I combine the two, so I will go for two weeks, one week as a guest, one week as myself. It is like a second home. But, I've moved a lot in my life and I'm the sort of person who feels that home is wherever I am. I enjoy my practice, I very much enjoy meeting new people and exchanging ideas, and sharing something so wonderful as it is to go back, it is wonderful to be in the world with so many interesting, engaging, people.

By Jo Walker