



FROM THE **BOARDROOM** TO A **MONASTERY**

At the young age of 27 he became the COO of a publicly listed company. He then moved on to become director of a strategy consulting firm. However, it's clear that the Universe had other plans for him, and so, Walter Gjergja, after years of training and study is now Shi Xing Mi – Secular Warrior Monk of the 32nd Shaolin Generation. YogaLife's **Ally** interviews him

THE JOURNEY OF A SHAOLIN MASTER

Walter Gjergja is a Shaolin Master, trainer, adviser, speaker and writer. Born in Italy but with mixed European origins, he has studied Kung Fu WuShu (Chinese martial arts) since the age of 13 and Chan (Shaolin philosophy) since the age of 18. A Disciple of Grand Master Shi De Yang, Shi Xing Mi has been officially nominated Secular Warrior Monk of the 32nd Shaolin Generation. Author of the book *Shaolin: A Journey* and co-author of *Gib Nicht Alles, Gib Das Richtige*, Shi Xing Mi has also completed a double major university degree and has taught the Shaolin disciplines in various fields and numerous countries, utilising his unique eastern and western cultural and professional background. In 2005 Shi Xing Mi founded Shaolin Wuseng Houbeidui Italy, in Milan, which is also active in other cities, and in Switzerland as Shaolin Wenhua Europe.

Here, he speaks to *YogaLife* about all things Shaolin; the relationship between Shaolin and yoga, and also gives us an insight into the whole concept originating from an Indian.

HOW DID THE SHAOLIN CULTURE COME ABOUT?

The beginning of Shaolin culture was inspired by an Indian monk, Bodhidharma [Damo] about 1,600 years ago. The Chinese monks learnt his unique Buddhist ideas, which led to the development of Zen, as well as his yoga techniques. Over the following centuries the Chinese monks then added to Bodhidharma's teachings with elements of Kung Fu, Qigong, Taoism, Confucianism, traditional

herbal medicine, etc. developing what is known today as traditional Shaolin culture. The Shaolin movements which are most similar to yoga are called Tongzigong and Yijinjing.

WHO WAS BODHIDHARMA?

Bodhidharma was a legendary master who travelled from his native India to China, accumulating varied life experiences and then condensing them in his own very pragmatic and practical interpretation of Buddhist philosophy. His life is part history, part legend, part myth. What is certain is that his figure and teachings inspired the birth of Chan and the development of Shaolin culture of which he is considered the patriarch.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF ZEN?

Zen is a Japanese Buddhist tradition, which originates from Chinese Chan [Zen is the Japanese translation of Chan and is now also widely used internationally to indicate Chan itself]. Chan philosophy was developed in Shaolin Temple and is primarily Buddhist, although it contains numerous elements of Taoism and some concepts of Confucianism.

HAS SHAOLIN CHANGED OVER THE AGES?

Following Bodhidharma's initial teachings, Shaolin culture developed for centuries thanks to the contribution of numerous generations of masters, gradually becoming an extensive method of humanistic development and a complete system of training for body, mind and spirit. Shaolin culture evolved to include and blend together Chan philosophy, various meditation methods, Qigong [health and energy exercises], Tongzigong [suppleness and flexibility exercises], Shaolin Gong Fu [martial arts and intense physical training], herbal medicine, and various massage and manipulation techniques. »





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best version
of yourself

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CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE PRACTICES AND REGIMEN FOLLOWED BY SHAOLIN DISCIPLES? HOW DOES SHAOLIN RELATE TO YOGA?

A Shaolin disciple studies all the above “subjects”, some in more depth than others but always in a holistic and balanced way. Body, mind and spirit form an ecosystem permeated by energy, so it is only through the synergy between the various practices that a disciple can truly maximise the wellness and potential of his or her ecosystem and master its energy. Training the body to clear the mind, clearing the mind to free the spirit, freeing the spirit to help yourself, helping yourself to help others. In this self-awareness journey through body, mind and spirit I think Shaolin culture is clearly related to yoga.

WHAT DOES DISCIPLINE MEAN IN SHAOLIN?

Discipline in Shaolin culture does not have the negative connotation it can have in the English language; discipline is considered a positive fundamental attitude, which enables us to actively take the steps we need to take, even when they might be challenging. Discipline, therefore, becomes an enjoyable travel companion, which makes possible what is difficult or perhaps even seemingly impossible.

WHAT DOES DISCIPLINE MEAN TO YOU, PERSONALLY?

Discipline to me simply means to do what I should, naturally. I try to implement this concept in all facets of life, enjoying the way difficult things become much easier if we apply the right energy and effort. Discipline is effort yet it should also become effortless: not a burden but rather an instrument to get to where we want to go.

WHAT IS THE STORY BEHIND YOUR NAME BEING CARVED IN THE PAGODA FOREST?

It is very unusual for a non-Chinese to become an official Shaolin secular warrior monk, even more so of an early lineage generation such as the 32nd, so my master in the Shaolin Temple kindly decided to commemorate this event by having my name inscribed next to those of other disciples on a stele in the Pagoda Forest.

WHAT ARE THE TRAITS OF A SHAOLIN DISCIPLE?

There should be eight: serenity, compassion, respect, gratitude, patience, courage, humility and willpower.

AT WHAT AGE CAN ONE BEGIN LEARNING THE SHAOLIN WAY OF LIFE?

At any age one can benefit from the Shaolin way of life, whether by dedicating just 10 minutes per week to a specific practice they need or by doing many daily hours of training and study. Of course to become a disciple it is best to start quite young, as some of the physical subjects to be studied will be very difficult as you get older.

SHAOLIN AS A FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT: WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?

The martial arts contained within Shaolin culture, Shaolin Gong Fu, are very spectacular, representing a form of moving meditation where body, mind and spirit are channelled into an expression of extremely dynamic energy. This makes them very fascinating to most people and, therefore, has become the subject of movies, documentaries, theatre performances and

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other forms of entertainment. In my opinion anything that can bring people closer to thinking about their own body, mind and spirit are positive, so the most spectacular aspects of Shaolin culture can be a way to introduce these themes to many people.

WHAT DOES 'MIND OVER MATTER' MEAN TO YOU?

All matter is just a perception of the mind, so the mind is always over, under and around the matter. Everything ultimately depends on how we interpret it and confront it.

IS THERE ANY AREA OF YOUR TRAINING THAT YOU ARE ABLE TO INCORPORATE INTO YOUR DAILY LIFE?

Any training is only relevant if applicable in daily life. Shaolin culture is about cultivating your body, mind and spirit so you can be the best version of yourself, therefore getting more out of life and giving more to life, becoming, for example, a better father or mother, husband or wife, doctor or worker, teacher or student.

DID YOU EVER HAVE A MOMENT DURING YOUR TRAINING WHERE YOU WANTED TO GIVE UP?

I had setbacks and challenges, like everyone, but I always found strength by focussing on the present;

usually doubts and fears are linked to the future, whilst regrets and sorrows are linked to the past. Focus on the present and listen to your heart.

IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, DO PEOPLE NEED TO SLOW DOWN IN A WORLD THAT IS INCREASING ITS PACE? WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE THEM?

Yes. Slowing down enables us to find clarity and it is in clarity that we can develop true sustainable performance, wellness, balance, satisfaction and serenity. Constant excessive stress and agitation do not improve performance in any field; it just hinders it, as well as damages our quality of life and health. ✨

