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While combat efficiency is important, Shaolin Kungfu is not just a fighting art but a complete programme of personal development
What does Shaolin Kungfu represent? What is the purpose of learning this style? — Juan, Mexico
Shaolin Kungfu is the style of martial art first developed at the Shaolin Monastery in China, and is now practised by many people in various parts of the world irrespective of race, culture and religion. Many kungfu styles branched out from Shaolin Kungfu, and some examples include Eagle Claw Kungfu, Praying Mantis Kungfu, Hoong Ka Kungfu, Choy-Li-Fatt Kungfu and Wing Choon Kungfu. In my opinion, shared by many other people, Shaolin Kungfu represents the pinnacle of martial art development. Indeed, as early as the Tang Dynasty in China more than a thousand years ago, the saying "Shaolin Kungfu is the foremost martial art beneath heaven" was already popular. The main purpose of learning Shaolin Kungfu is to have a complete programme of personal development from the most basic to the most advanced levels. At the physical level, Shaolin Kungfu provides health, fitness, agility and vitality, besides the ability to defend ourselves. At the emotional level, Shaolin Kungfu gives us joy and tranquility. Shaolin Kungfu trains us to be mentally focused, and enables us to expand our mind. At its highest level, Shaolin Kungfu leads to spiritual fulfillment, irrespective of religion. Obviously, Shaolin Kungfu is not just a fighting art. It is also significant to note that an important aspect of the Shaolin teaching is direct experience, which in this case means that a Shaolin disciple does not merely talk about good health and mind expansion, or just read up on spirituality, but actually experience these benefits. If he does not experience, according to his developmental stage, the appropriate results Shaolin Kungfu is purported to give, he should seriously review his training. An important aspect of Shaolin teaching is direct experience. Shaolin practitioners do not merely talk about spiritual cultivation but actually experience it.
LINKS
Reproduced from Questions 2 in the first of the Question-Answer Series September-October 1997 Courses and Classes Origins and Founding (495 A.D.)
Shaolin Temple, established in 495 A.D. during the Northern Wei Dynasty, lies at the western foot of Songshan Mountain, 13 kilometers northwest of Dengfeng City, Henan Province. Emperor Xiaowen commissioned the temple to host the Indian Buddhist monk Batuo (Buddhabhadra), who dedicated his life to translating scriptures and teaching the dharma. The name "Shaolin" means "Temple in the thick forests of Shaoshi Mountain." Batuo's disciples, Sengchou and Huiguang, carried forward his legacy. Later, the Indian monk Bodhidharma, regarded as the first Patriarch of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, arrived. He is said to have crossed the Yangtze River on a reed and meditated in a cave at Wuru Peak for nine years. His teachings laid the foundation for Chan Buddhism and established Shaolin Temple as both the origin of Chan Buddhism and the cradle of Chinese Kung Fu.
Historical Development Through the Dynasties
Northern Zhou (568-581) During the Northern Wei Dynasty, Buddhism flourished under imperial patronage. Records describe Shaolin Temple as a center of Buddhist scholarship and meditation, attracting eminent monks like Bodhiruci, who translated scriptures. However, religious suppression during the Northern Zhou Dynasty led to Shaolin Temple's temporary renaming as Zhihu Temple and a decline in its prominence. Sui and Tang Dynasties (581-907) Under the Sui Dynasty, Shaolin Temple regained imperial favor and received land grants. During the Tang Dynasty, it achieved fame for its warrior monks, whose support in battles earned the temple rewards, including farmland, aiding its restoration after wartime destruction. By this time, the temple had become renowned for its Vinaya (monastic discipline) and martial arts traditions. Song and Jin Dynasties (960-1234) Despite challenges during the Five Dynasties period, Shaolin Temple maintained a strong presence. In the Song Dynasty, Chan master Bao'en revitalized the Caodong school of Chan Buddhism at Shaolin. Cultural exchanges flourished, with Japanese monks studying Buddhism at the temple, fostering long-lasting ties. Yuan and Ming Dynasties (1271-1644) Under the Yuan Dynasty, Shaolin Temple was recognized as the ancestral monastery of Chan Buddhism, boasting over 2,000 monks and 23 affiliated temples. The Ming Dynasty saw extensive renovations, including the construction of numerous pagodas, which reached their historical peak in number. The temple's martial arts and Chan practices continued to thrive. Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China (1644-1949) During the Qing Dynasty, Shaolin Temple faced challenges, including reduced prosperity and political interference. In 1928, a devastating fire destroyed much of the temple, marking a low point in its history. Only a few structures, like the Thousand Buddha Hall, survived. Revival and Modern Era (1949-Present) After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the government undertook extensive renovations. Under the leadership of Abbot Shi Yongxin, starting in 1987, Shaolin Temple experienced a cultural and spiritual revival. Key achievements include: Cultural Preservation: Restoration of historic halls, editing and publishing Buddhist texts, and enriching the Sutra-keeping Pavilion's collection. Promotion of Shaolin Culture: Hosting international cultural festivals, academic seminars, and the annual Chan Qi meditation retreat. Global Influence: Establishing Shaolin Kung Fu as a global cultural icon and fostering exchanges through performances and lectures at institutions like Harvard, Stanford, and Oxford. Today, Shaolin Temple is synonymous with China's cultural heritage. Its influence extends worldwide, serving as a beacon of Buddhism and a symbol of the integration of martial arts, spirituality, and tradition. Shaolin monks are famous for their amazing kung fu skills and strength world-wide.The Shaolin Temple's monks became fighters despite Buddhism's peaceful teachings.Over 1500 years, Shaolin monks have faced many challenges but continue to thrive today. The Shaolin Monastery is the most famous temple in China, renown for its kung fu fighting Shaolin monks. With amazing feats of strength, flexibility, and pain-endurance, the Shaolin have created a worldwide reputation as the ultimate Buddhist warriors. Yet Buddhism is generally considered to be a peaceful religion with an emphasis on principles such as non-violence, vegetarianism, and even self-sacrifice to avoid harming others — how, then, did the monks of Shaolin Temple become fighters? The history of Shaolin begins about 1500 years ago, when a stranger arrived in China from lands to the west, bringing with him a new interpretation religion and spans all the way to modern-day China where tourists from around the world come to experience displays of their ancient martial arts and teachings. Legend says that around 480 CE a wandering Buddhist teacher came to China from India, known as Buddhabhadra, Batuo or Fotuo in Chinese. According to later, Chan — or in Japanese, Zen — Buddhist tradition, Batuo taught that Buddhism could best be transmitted from master to student, rather than through the study of Buddhist texts. In 496, the Northern Wei Emperor Xiaowen gave Batuo funds to establish a monastery at holy Mt. Shaoshi in the Song mountain range, 30 miles from the imperial capital of Luoyang. This temple was named Shaolin, with "Shao" taken from Mount Shaoshi and "lin" meaning "grove" — however, when Luoyang and the Wl Dynasty fell in 534, temples in the area were destroyed, possibly including Shaolin. Another Buddhist teacher was Bodhidharma, who came from either India or Persia. He famously refused to teach Shaolin Culture: Hosting international cultural festivals, academic seminars, and the annual Chan Qi meditation retreat. Global Influence: Establishing Shaolin Kung Fu as a global cultural icon and fostering exchanges through performances and lectures at institutions like Harvard, Stanford, and Oxford. Today, Shaolin Temple is synonymous with Shaolin's empty-hand fighting methods. However, the monks fought on the Ming side in the 1630s and lost. In 1641, rebel leader Li Zicheng destroyed the monastic army, sacked Shaolin and killed or drove away from the monks before going on to take Beijing in 1644, ending the Ming Dynasty. Unfortunately, he was driven out in turn by the Manchus who founded the Qing Dynasty. Shaolin Temple lay mostly deserted for decades and the last abbot, Yongyu, left without naming a successor in 1664. Legend says that a group of Shaolin monks rescued the Kangxi Emperor from nomads in 1674. According to the story, envious officials then burned down the temple, killing most of the monks and Gu Yanwu traveled to the remains of Shaolin in 1679 to record its history. Shaolin slowly recovered from being sacked, and in 1704, the Kangxi Emperor made a gift of his own calligraphy to signal the temple's return to imperial favor. The monks had learned caution, however, and empty-hand fighting began to displace weapons training — it was best not to seem too threatening to the throne. In 1735 to 1736, the emperor Yongzheng and his son Qianlong decided to renovate Shaolin and cleanse its grounds of "fake monks" — martial artists who affected monks robes without being ordained. The Qianlong Emperor even visited Shaolin in 1750 and wrote poetry about its beauty, but later banned monastic martial arts. During the nineteenth century, the monks of Shaolin were accused of violating their monastic vows by eating meat, drinking alcohol and even hiring prostitutes. Many saw vegetarianism as impractical for warriors, which is probably why government officials sought to impose it upon Shaolin's fighting monks. The temple's reputation received a serious blow during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 when Shaolin monks were implicated — probably incorrectly — in teaching the Boxers martial arts. Again in 1912, when China's last imperial dynasty fell due to its weak position compared with intrusive European powers, the country fell into chaos, which ended only with the victory of the Communists under Mao Zedong in 1949. Meanwhile, in 1928, the warlord Shi Yousan burned down 90% of the Shaolin Temple, and much of it would not be rebuilt for 60 to 80 years. The country eventually came under Chairman Mao's rule, and monastic Shaolin monks fell from cultural relevance. At first, Mao's government did not bother with what was left of Shaolin. However, in accordance with Marxist doctrine, the new government was officially atheist. In 1966, the Cultural Revolution broke out and Buddhist temples were one of the Red Guards' primary targets. The few remaining Shaolin monks were flogged through the streets and then jailed, and Shaolin's texts, paintings, and other treasures were stolen or destroyed. This might have finally been the end of Shaolin, if not for the 1982 film "Shaolin Shi" or "Shaolin Temple," featuring the debut of Jet Li (Li Lianjie). The movie was based very loosely on the story of the monks' aid to Li Shimin and became a huge smash hit in China. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, tourism exploded at Shaolin, reaching more than 1 million people per year by the end of the 1990s. Shaolin's monks are now among the best known on Earth, and they put on martial arts displays in world capitals with literally thousands of films having been made about their exploits. It's hard to imagine what the first abbot of Shaolin would think if he could see the temple now. He might be surprised and even dismayed by the amount of bloodshed in the temple's history and its use in modern culture as a tourist destination. However, to survive the tumult that has characterized so many periods of Chinese history, the monks of Shaolin had to learn the skills of warriors, most of important of which was survival. Despite a number of attempts to erase the temple, it survives and even thrives today at the base of the Songshan Range. It is said that a Buddhist monk from India named Buddhabhadra, or Ba Tuo in Chinese, came to China during Emperor Xiaowen's reign during the Northern Wei Dynasty period in 495AD. The emperor liked Buddhabhadra and offered to support him in teaching Buddhism at court. Buddhabhadra declined and was given land to build a temple on Mt. Song. There he built Shaolin, which translates into small forest. Thirty years after Shaolin was founded, another Buddhist monk called Bodhidharma from India came to China to teach Yogic concentration, known commonly today by the Japanese term "Zen" Buddhism. He traveled throughout China and finally came to Mt. Song where he found Shaolin Temple where he asked to be admitted. The abbot, Fang Chang, refused, and it is said Bodhidharma climbed high into the mountains to a cave where he meditated for nine years. It is believed that he sat, facing the cave wall for much of these nine years so that his shadow became permanently outlined on the cave wall. (Incidentally, the cave is now a sacred place and the shadow imprint has been removed from the cave and moved to the temple compound where you can view it during your visit. It is quite remarkable.) After nine years, Fang Chang finally granted Bodhidharma entrance to Shaolin where he became the First Patriarch of Zen Buddhism. Supposedly Bodhidharma exercised in the cave to keep fit, and when he entered Shaolin Temple found that the monks there were not very fit. He developed a set of exercises that later became the foundation for the specialized interpretation of martial arts at Shaolin. Martial arts were already widespread in China and many of the monks were retired soldiers. Thus existing martial arts exercises were combined with Bodhidharma's teachings to create the Shaolin version of Kung Fu. Shaolin monks practice Kung Fu. Nancy Brown / Getty Images Originally used as exercise, the Kung Fu eventually had to be used against attacking assailants after the monastery's assets. Shaolin eventually became famous for its warrior monks who were masterful in their practice of Kung Fu. Being Buddhist monks, however, they were bound by a set of principles called martial ethics, wude, that includes prohibitions such as "do not betray your teacher" and "do not fight for frivolous reasons" as well as eight "hit" and "do not hit" zones to ensure the opponent will not be too seriously injured. Not long after Bodhidharma entered Shaolin, Emperor Wudi banned Buddhism in 574AD and Shaolin was destroyed. Later, under Emperor Jingwen in the Northern Zhou Dynasty Buddhism was revived and Shaolin rebuilt arts restored. During turmoil early in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), thirteen warrior monks helped the Tang emperor rescue his son, Li Shimin, from an army aiming to overthrow the Tang. In recognition of their help, Li Shimin, once emperor, named Shaolin the "Supreme Temple" in all of China and fostered learning, teaching and exchange between the imperial court and armies and the Shaolin monks. Over the next few centuries until Ming loyalists used Shaolin as a refuge, Shaolin Temple and its style of martial arts enjoyed a flourishing of development and advancement. As a haven for Ming loyalists, Qing rulers finally destroyed Shaolin Temple, burning it to the ground and destroying many of its treasures and sacred texts in the process. Shaolin Kung Fu was outlawed and the monks and followers, those who lived, were dispersed through China and to other, lesser, temples following Shaolin teachings. Shaolin was allowed to reopen again about one hundred years later but rulers were still distrustful of Shaolin Kung Fu and the power it gave its followers. It was burned and rebuilt several times over the following centuries. Oleksiy Maksymenko / Getty Images Today, Shaolin Temple is a practicing Buddhist temple where adaptations on the original Shaolin Kung Fu are taught. According to some sources, the original Shaolin Kung Fu was too powerful so was replaced by Wu Shu, a less aggressive form of martial arts. Whatever is practiced today, it is still a place of dedication and learning, as can be seen by the hundreds of youngsters practicing outside on a given morning. There are now over eighty Kung Fu schools around Mt. Song in Dengfeng where thousands of Chinese children are sent to study as young as age five. Shaolin Temple and its teachings remain impressive. Thanks for your feedback!

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