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sHan li

A story about the longest staying foreigner in Shao Lin since over 500 years

On 6th February, 1998, sHan li arrived at the Shao lin temple to study Buddhism, Chinese culture and tradition, and he has done so ever since. He has taken part in many events and demonstrations of the Shao lin Temple, and thus drew a lot of attention in the Chinese media.

In 2000, sHan li was chosen by the Shao lin temple to take part in the "liu da men pai", a meeting held in Nanjing between Wudang Mountain, Ermei, Shaolin, Chen jia gou, Tibetan Lamas and kung dong. This meeting was the first of its kind for 800 years and lasted 2 weeks, in which time the attendants performed and exchanged knowledge.

On the 9th April 2003, sHan li was personally chosen by his abbot, Shi Yong Xin, to be one of the select 10 people that would perform traditional Shao lin kung Fu to define the true Shao lin art. Professional Martial artists, both fighters and intellectual analysts from all over the world were invited. The meeting lasted for 3days, in which time "chan wu yi" (Zen, Art, Medicine and Kung Fu) was discussed and also the future development of the Shao lin tradition.

sHan li has been in Shao lin for 7 years and is as much an intricate part of Shao lin as Shao lin is a part of him.

Just imagine yourself, sitting on a couch at the age of 16 and suddenly being captured by a very strong urge to go to China. After telling your parents, and a month of arranging to get a passport, a flight and a visa, you arrive at Beijing airport at five o'clock in the morning, carrying around two handbags, asking yourself why you just did what you did. Imagine, in addition, that you only speak and write the German language and that in February 1998, China was not yet that much accommodated to receiving tourists as it is today. Luckily, the airport exits are equipped with the English signs "exit" and "entrance", which are just clear enough for a German person to be understood. So you exit the airport, you sneak yourself into a tourist group, hoping that this will at least get you to a hotel and a money change desk. After being

relatively successful so far, you leave the hotel and walk around in Beijing in the early morning hours, when an old Chinese lady walks up to you who turns out to be a professor of the German language. You tell her about your wish to visit Shao lin. Although she warns you that things are not that easy for a 16 year old German speaking foreigner (just as if you had not noticed this already yourself), she agrees to arrange your journey to Shao lin. By now carrying a Chinese vocabulary of "where is the toilet", counting to 10, "sorry", "thank you" and "telephone", you arrive in Shao lin in the evening, where you are magically picked up and dropped in one of the many kung fu schools. Next morning, at five o'clock, training starts.

Sounds too much like a fantasy? Well, welcome to sHan li's reality.

"but the imagination did not stop there", explains sHan li, "you have to realize that back then, things were very, very different from today's situation. In the early days of my arrival, you should think of Shao lin as a very dirty, remote, kung fu slum in which physical respect was the ruler. Diseases came and went like the seasons, mysterious infections arose periodically and food poisoning was a common experience, as a result of too many people, rats and bugs living too close together in a total ignorance of the meaning of hygiene. Especially in winter, without any means to heat a human body (no room heaters, no water, no electricity), the situation would get very intense. The first hour of trying to get to sleep felt like being in an ice castle of frozen blankets in a room that did a great job as a refrigerator (I actually stored ice creams in my room just because I could). I remember waking up many times because my eyes were starting to freeze, or my toes would feel like they would snap into frozen pieces any moment. I would go out to try and warm my body in the moonlight. At the other extremity, in the summer, the place would be infested with bugs and small creatures of all kinds, the stench of the many garbage piles and outdoor toilets would get disgusting. Most disgustingly: the same rats that danced around in the toilets by day time, would dance around on my face in the night together with the gecko's and salamanders who launched themselves from the ceiling like full airborne paratroopers. You can imagine that after days of over 8 hours of very intense basic training, I did not really appreciate any disturbance of my sleeping time. Especially not since the next training day (which is every day) would start at 5 o'clock with a very strict row inspection by the instructors: people who appeared to be sleeping (even if present) would be very severely punished. Discipline was the highest standard in this environment of 1000's of fight-ready, well trained people in one tiny valley."

After having been in Shao lin for some time, sHan li met a guy from Hong Kong, who introduced him to one of the monks in the monastery. Impressing the chief coach of the warrior monks with his progress in kung fu (having received only a couple of months of basic training so far), he was accepted into a selective group of 8 people who were personally trained by the master.

"to imagine how I experienced this period you have to think of the way this is presented in the old kung fu movies: receiving training in a place like this, from a master like that, felt, and actually was a great honour. Especially as a foreigner, I felt very much under the pressure of having to achieve and prove myself day after day. In addition, no excuse was accepted (from anyone) for not showing up at training: illness, pain, injuries, throwing up, nothing could ever be serious enough to skip a training. I remember throwing up while exercising and still being made clear to simply continue without complaining. The punishment for being even slightly passive during training was simply to be ignored, and thus not to receive training for an unknown time. In return for this hardship, I felt very proud to be more or less accepted in this small community; training, eating, traveling to other places and having many adventures together with our master."

Things did not stay like this for long, though. Anyone who has visited Shao lin in recent years will witness to the fact that, even though much of the atmospheric circumstances sHan li describes can still be found, things definitely eased up since then. Dirt roads have been upgraded to paved roads, relatively comfortable hotels have been constructed and getting yourself trained even in the monastery has become a task of finding the right scouts as soon as you exit the Shao Lin bound bus which comfortably departs from the Zheng Zhou train station. The bumpy, 3 to sometimes 6 hour ride from Zheng Zhou to Shao Lin has been made a very comfortable 1.5 hour ride thanks to the construction of a shining new superhighway last year. The random collection of houses, shops and schools in the valley have been thoroughly cleaned out during the last 3 years and transformed into a beautiful scenery of bamboo forests, grass fields and English signs, thanks to a massive investment of 5 million euro by the Chinese government. "This place has transformed from a kung fu slum into paradise", adds sHan li.

More importantly, however, sHan li's outlook on kung fu and life itself transformed in a comparable speed. After having lived in a relative seclusion for years, having met many Shao lin pilgrims, among which martial artists, monks, people of all kinds of professions and nationalities, he became more and more aware of the shortcomings of bluntly studying

movements. On the other hand, he became more and more impressed with the outstanding personality of some of the people he had gotten to know over the years.

"Some of those people gave examples of very great strength in the way they spoke and seemed to have a natural superiority over even the strongest martial artist. I came to realize that this could not be the result of simply practicing forms or banging on a sandbag. Still, I had no clue how these people achieved such abilities, let alone how I could achieve them myself. The facts that I respected them for this reason and that they respected me for being in a place like this for so long in seclusion from the outside world, made us get along very well, and slowly the subjects of our conversations grew more serious. They showed me the fact that the real difference (which they were the living examples of) lied in the way of the heart: cultivation, Buddhism. There are Arhats, Bodhisatva's and Buddha's amongst us, just as real as there are presidents, lawyers and receptionists. At this realization, an entire new era started for me. By now, I have witnessed very convincing examples of people who have attained abilities that go far beyond the simple training of movements, far beyond throwing needles through a glass pane, having your body lifted up by spears or breaking a pile of stones with your head. I will not give any examples, because these are experiences that only have meaning and impact for the one experiencing them. By simply reading about this you will never understand, by not devoting all your life to going the way of the heart you will never experience things like those, either."

"I hope to explain the importance of this by giving an explanation about the difference between reproducing and producing, an explanation about the real meaning of spiritual development for anyone who is starting to go into a spiritual direction (for instance by practicing martial arts, tcm or the deep want about to know more about one self) but according to his lack of understanding about the actual meaning of spiritual development, he will be walking around telling everyone "yes i believe in jesus, bhudda and mohammed because they really existed and also in daoism because those are over five thousand years of scientific research and continuous accumulation of knowledge", but in reality only being held back by his self-made philosophy, unable to go into any direction and inevitably facing an unmountable high barrier which is blocking the way to real deep understanding: all his kung fu movements will be nothing more than "empty" movements, all his understanding of tcm will never go beyond the knowledge of the body's jing luo -energy lines-, the placing of needles and the application of herbs, all his talking will be out of memory. it is very easy to fascinate one with a certain amount of deep sayings which with a bit of luck are placed in the right

situation to launch this kind of feeling but they will not change the fact that this person has not done any first step yet to have actually freed itself yet from any mortal delusion . now if one can go so far to find out that there is such barrier he has done pretty well for him self, because now he will know that knowing all there is to be known is not the same as knowing the root of all there is to be known. even the best university teacher can teach everything confucius said, but will never be able to teach the root of confucius' words. you can study all there is to know about a tree, by knowing about the leaves, the branches and the trunk, but as long as you do not grasp the knowledge of the roots, any tree built from this incomplete knowledge will never be able to grow by itself, and still tumble down at the first morning breeze. you can read all the beautiful zen poems as there are findable in the world but they will never guide you to the source because as long as you didn't find the real you, you will only ever be turned by the key but never will you turn it .you will just be like some one who wants to have his own coca cola production but instead of to franchise the logo and to start a factory which will actually produce and make a proper income, he is running from shop to shop wildly buying all the cans and bottles .now one of the biggest misunderstandings for someone who is using such philosophies made up of the big pile of studies and scriptures made by masters and sages is to think that he's going according to the flow of nature; how can you without knowing your own nature? so if you think knowing about the masters and studying all the knowledge of the masters is enough to be a master you have been heavily misguided: reproduction is very different from production. all the arhats, bhoddisatvas and bhuddas have proven to us already that the way they went worked, and the good thing is that they all have passed the tools needed for anyone to follow them along the same path: Buddhism, which is the only ever proven cultivation as guiding the serious practitioner of it to total understanding. i say practitioner because bhuddism gives you the way to practice instead of only providing the rules: you are a practitioner / cultivator instead of merely a believer or blind follower.the rules in bhuddism are given to ease your way, to ease your study of cause and effect and the practice of cultivation, just as well as the cultivation will let you understand about the roots of those rules.the shaolin monastery is famous all over the world for the combining of martial arts and zen bhuddism: the chan wu (zen and martial arts), I came to this place to study the dharma as introduced into Shao lin by Dharmo (Bodidharma), the 28th patriarch of Buddhism, the 1st patriarch of Zen Buddhism in China, and to go the way of the chan wu as a life style."

sHan li spoke, Ee wrote, introduction by Yun li

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