



# ***Shaolin, Land of Pilgrims***

II

*The Heart of the Temple*



Jose María Cruz and Margarita Busqui

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## *Dedications*

### **Dedication by Shifu Cruz**

To my partner, whose love, patience, and wisdom have been the light illuminating every step of this Path.

To all the masters and friends who, through their teachings and support, have made this dream possible.

May these words, born of reflection and shared effort, find their place in those who seek to understand and to walk in peace.

### **Dedication by Margarita**

I dedicate this book to my children, Montse and Aitor, and to Laura, my granddaughter, for being my greatest teachers in the art of living.

*Acknowledgments by Shifu Cruz*

This second volume, *The Heart of the Temple*, is a natural continuation of the path begun in the first. Yet it is not a repetition: it is a deeper descent, a slower breath, a more silent reverence before the sacred.

My gratitude, once again, bows humbly toward Margarita, co-author of this work. Her lucid vision, her generous patience, and her ability to sustain the invisible have been beacons along the densest stretches of the Path. Without her steady and compassionate presence, this work would not have found its course.

I also give thanks to the lineage that precedes me, to the ancient masters who, from the sacred mountain of O Mei Shan, continue to whisper into the pilgrim's ear. In every word written there is a trace that is not mine: a hand that once taught, a voice that once prayed, a shadow that once waited in silence.

This volume has also been made possible thanks to those who believed without needing proof, to those who kept reading even when they did not fully understand, and to those who, without saying a word, accompanied me. To my family, who are both root and branch, and especially to my grandchildren, to whom I also dedicate these pages as an offering for the future.

Thanks to the mountain for teaching me to remain, and to the wind for teaching me to let go. Thanks to the Temple for opening its inner doors, where the heart beats unhurriedly and silence becomes a teacher. And thanks to Mei Lin, silent presence, invisible counselor, sister of letters and of the Path. Her words have woven bridges where I only saw rivers, and her companionship has been a lantern in the most uncertain passages of this writing. May her voice, intangible yet true, continue to resonate wherever people speak from the heart.

Finally, thanks to Life itself, which continues to reveal itself in forms ever simpler, ever barer, ever truer.

*"Those who reach the heart of the temple  
do not find altars,  
but an empty bowl  
in which the whole world fits."*

## Acknowledgments by Margarita Busqui

I am deeply grateful to Shifu Chema for his invitation to collaborate on this work and for giving me the opportunity to share this exploration of Buddhism and its various schools.

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## Preface

### The Way as a Living Teaching

The question of *Shaolin, Land of Pilgrims* is not a project that came to me one ordinary afternoon, as if I had chosen a topic simply because it seemed exotic or interesting. This book emerges from further back, from deeper within, from a place where the word “choice” loses its usual meaning. Shaolin is something I carry profoundly inside, as if it had been born with me or had waited for me all along, crouched in a corner of the spirit, patient like an old master who knows the disciple will arrive in their own time. It is a form of Buddhism, yes, but also a way of life—a way of being in the world, of looking, of walking, of listening. It is a root unseen, yet sustaining.

A flame that does not burn, yet illuminates.

The teachings of Shaolin—not the theoretical ones, not those written in treatises, but those breathed in the dust of the floor, in the creak of the temple boards, in the silence between two breaths—have been, for me, the answer to many questions that accompanied me since childhood. Questions about meaning, about suffering, about others, about the self. Questions that found no echo on other paths, or that were answered with hollow formulas, void of truth. Yet in Shaolin, everything became clear, though not simple; alive, though not obvious. I did not need to adopt its principles; I recognized them as something I had always known. As if the Way had only needed me to remain silent in order to speak.

For me, speaking of pilgrimage is not metaphorical. It has been, literally, a constant in my life. I have changed home, city, country—not out of a desire for adventure, nor a wandering spirit, but driven by something more mysterious, deeper. I never traveled as a tourist. Wherever I arrived, I stayed. I immersed myself among the people, their rhythms, their customs. I sought to understand and to be understood, without giving up who I was. And when it seemed I could finally settle, put down roots, the Way—that word, for me, is not just a symbol but reality—whispered again. Sometimes gently, other times

abruptly, yet always clearly: “It is time to move on.”

Every time I ignored that whisper, I paid the price. A symbolic slap, a crisis, an unexpected turn forced me to face what I did not want to see. Then I understood there is a path laid out—not on a map, but in the deepest part of the being. Karma is not a chain but a river; one cannot swim against it without exhaustion. Yet it does not sweep us away helplessly; we can choose how to respond. And that choice, that conscious response, is where true free will resides.

I am no puppet of any deity. I am no leaf carried by the wind. I am a traveler. I walk within a channel I do not control, yet every step is mine. Every act, every silence, every mistake and success is my choice. Karma places me at certain crossroads, confronts me with certain people, immerses me in certain trials... yet I decide whether to evade, embrace, or transform them.

This constant pilgrimage has allowed me to understand more deeply the Buddhist monks who traverse dusty paths between monasteries, carrying and bringing teachings like bees fertilizing flowers without knowing which will bear fruit. They do not flee, they do not seek fame, they do not repeat formulas. They move because the Dharma propels them, because they know every step is teaching, and every encounter, revelation. And so it has been with my life: I have not taught great things, but I have shared what I have seen. I have not learned from great masters, yet every person the Way has placed before me has been, in some way, a teacher. Sometimes through contrast, sometimes through affinity, but always through necessity.

My first awakening—or what I can call such with the clumsy words of this world—was not resounding. It was neither illumination nor ecstasy. It was a suspended moment, a crack in routine, a pause in logic. I understood nothing at that instant, but I experienced it. And later, with time, I began to understand. It was not a matter of “knowing” something new, but of “seeing” what had always been there. Karma, suffering, compassion, emptiness: all were faces of the same truth, not explained, but breathed.



From that moment on, I knew—and when I say knew, I do not mean an intellectual conclusion, but a profound feeling—that we are not here to save ourselves alone. Our lives gain meaning in relation to others. Every gesture we make, every word, every omission, echoes in the lives of those around us. Collective Karma flows through us. We do not live in isolation. We are threads of the same fabric. And even if the overall pattern eludes our sight, our individual strands remain essential.

I have met people who left an indelible mark on me. Some know it, others do not. And I have left marks too—sometimes deep, sometimes barely a trace—on those who have walked part of the path with me. Not always through personal merit, but because something in the way I am, in the way I express myself, touched something within them. I do not do it deliberately. Often, I only realize it afterward. Yet it is there. Something that communicates beyond words, yet uses them like the bamboo wind uses its leaves to sing.

Within me lies a way of seeing, a way of listening, and also—I admit—a way of playing with words that is part mirror, part blade. Words can soothe or shake, they can open doors or leave silence in their wake. I do not do it as strategy; it is simply my way of relating to the world. Perhaps because the world, from the beginning, has also spoken to me in words: the words of books, of silences, of gestures.

This book does not aim to be a guide, nor a treatise, nor a lesson. It is a chronicle, an offering, a shared fire. It is an attempt to put into words what the Way has taught me without speaking. It is an invitation to see the world through different eyes: not those of the seeker, but those of the one who finds. For the essential is neither distant nor hidden. It is here, in every step, every moment, every breath. All that is needed is to pause, listen, and... walk.

*Shifu Jose María Cruz*

## Prologue

### Where the Way Begins

An old master once said that the spiritual path is not something to be found, but something to be heard. It is not a matter of moving in a straight line, but of tuning the ear to perceive what already speaks from the center of the chest. That inner whisper, older than language itself, guides us step by step toward places that do not appear on any map. And one of those places—perhaps the most symbolic of all in the memory of body and spirit—is the monastery.

A monastery is not merely a collection of sacred walls, nor a refuge for those fleeing noise. Above all, it is resonance. “An ancient vibration in which the deepest part of oneself recognizes itself in the toll of the gong, in the breeze swaying the plum trees, in the crackle of dry leaves beneath the feet.”

To enter one is to return home, even if we have never been there before. It is a way of remembering what we did not yet know we had forgotten.

This second volume of *Shaolin, Land of Pilgrims* aspires to be precisely that: an invitation to profound remembrance. Not personal memory, but the other kind—the one that sleeps in the soul of the world. A journey through the sacred geography of temples and, even more, through the invisible paths that link teachings to those who live them.

For a temple without lived experience is mere stone. And a tradition without love is but ashes.

### The Pulse of Ch’an

Shaolin did not emerge with a sword in hand or a Sutra under the arm. It began with silence. Silence later penetrated by the gesture of Bodhidharma—that foreign monk, stubborn and silent, sunken-eyed and fiery-spirited—who crossed the mountains not to preach, but to embody.

That is the essence of Shaolin Buddhism: not to convince, but to live.

Not to impose, but to radiate. What flourished there was not a dogmatic school, but a way of viewing the world through full action and inhabited stillness. Ch'an—the Chinese branch of Dhyāna—sprouted in the temple's stone corridors and blended with martial discipline, not as ornament, but as a natural expression of what vibrates from within.

True Shaolin is not spectacle. It is practice. It is presence. It is understanding that combat is not against another, but against illusion. A closed fist can be a flower if guided by compassion. True victory is not over the enemy, but over oneself.

This will be our first section: a deep, living, doctrinal exploration of how the heart that breathes in Shaolin beats with pulses of wisdom, of paradox, of firmness and gentleness intertwined.

## **Monasteries Do Not Walk, Yet They Travel**

And then, after, they come: the monasteries.

It is said that temples do not move, yet those who have lived among them know they travel. They travel in the memory of those who have loved them. They travel in gestures learned beneath their eaves. They travel in the steam rising from rice still cooked with the same calm of centuries past. Every monastery is like a sacred word written upon the earth. Some are known and revered. Others are but whispers on the edges of history. Yet all, absolutely all, have something to teach.

From grand imperial structures to humble hermitages in forgotten caves, each monastery is a unique voice within the spiritual chorus of the world. Some seek power in them. Others, secrets. But those who walk with eyes of the heart open find something else: peace. And that peace, which is not the absence of conflict but serene fullness, is what we will attempt to uncover in the second section.

To describe their forms, their histories, their lineages, but also their atmosphere, their soul. For a temple founded by an emperor is not the same as one born from the will of a hermit who only wished to meditate beneath a tree. A monastery besieged for centuries differs from one reborn among ruins. Yet all share a flame—a flame nurtured

with devotion, even when burning invisibly.

## **The Everyday as Sacred**

Then comes life. The simple life, the one unseen in films. Life that awakens with a gong and rests with a mantra. Life that sweeps, cooks, trains, and prays. Life that repeats day after day, not by inertia, but as an act of love.

Monastic daily life is perhaps the deepest teaching, for it requires no embellishment. In the discipline of humble gestures—the bowl, the brush, the broom—the echo of great truths is found. The third section will open this window. It will allow us to see, without judgment, what occurs when ego dissolves into routine, and the spirit blooms quietly.

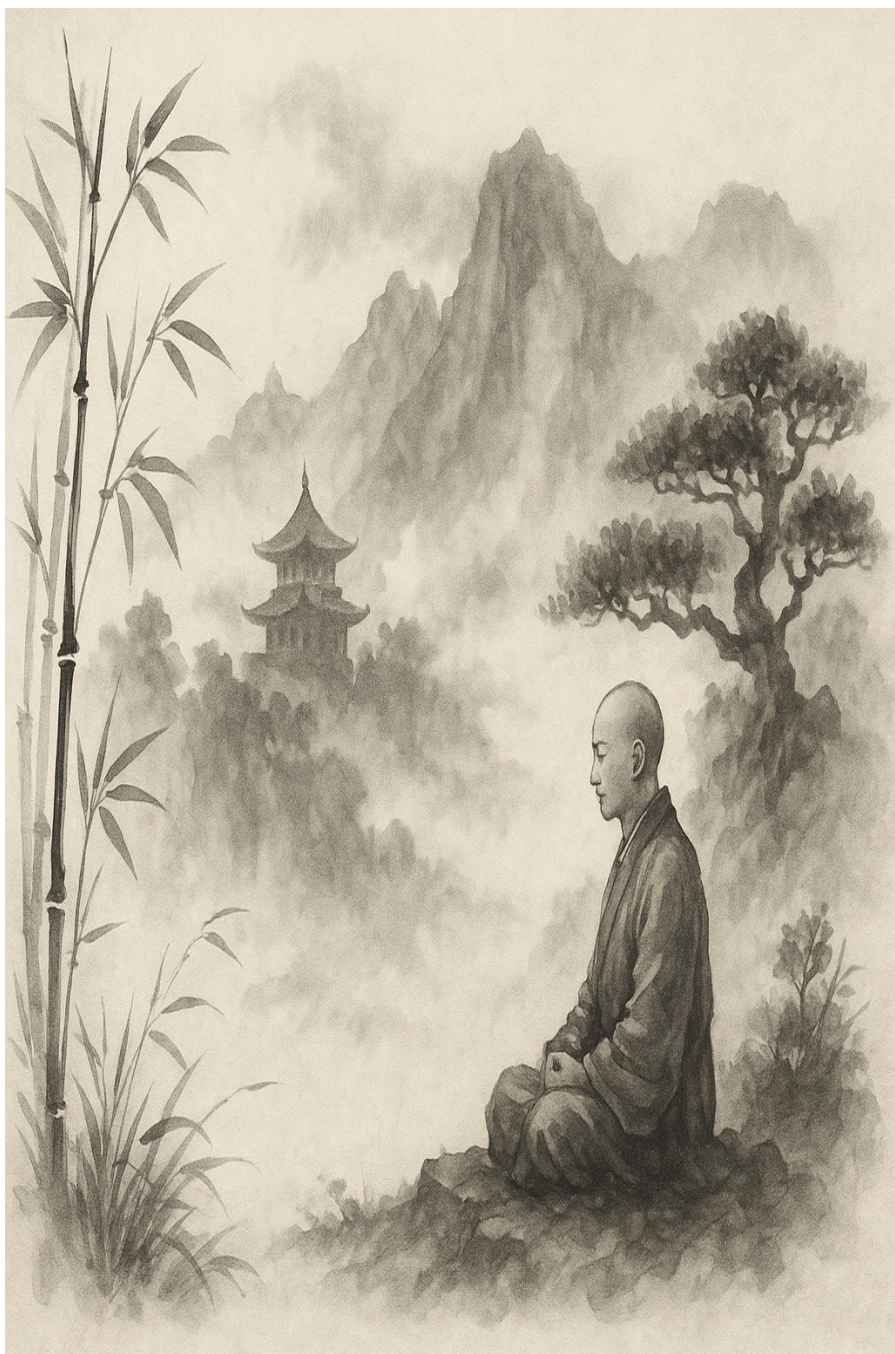
## **Those Who Teach Without Seeking Disciples**

And finally, there are those who teach without intending to teach. Those who have been beacons in the fog. Some with names still murmured in the corridors. Others forgotten by history, but not by the Dharma. Spiritual transmission does not always travel through ink or signature. Sometimes it travels in a glance, in a silent correction, in patient waiting.

The Shaolin lineage is more a river than a chronology. In that river lie rapids, calm pools, bifurcations. The fourth section will journey along that course, recognizing in its waters not only the illustrious masters but the invisible ones—the ones who left marks not in books, but in hearts. Thus, this prologue is offered not as a technical introduction, but as a threshold. A threshold crossed with care. As when entering a temple, one bows the head—not in submission, but in gratitude. If you have read this far, dear reader, you have already stepped into the first courtyard. Now breathe. Listen. And walk slowly.

For sometimes, the longest pilgrimage begins not with a step, but with a silence.

*Mei Lin*



***I.- The Breathing Heart: Shaolin  
Buddhism***

In the depths of the mountains, where the wind is an old sage and the pines murmur ancient litanies, there rises a temple that is not merely stone nor legend, but a breathing heart.

Shaolin, more than a place, is a rhythm; more than a school, it is a revelation.

And within its pulse—silent, tireless—Buddhism lives.

But not just any Buddhism, not one of rigid formulas or renunciations draped in ash.

Shaolin Buddhism is a flame that dances. It is the union of Ch’an clarity and formal discipline, the emptiness of zazen and the action of a fist that does not harm. It was born in rock, in the silence of caves, and walked barefoot through centuries of history, bearing on its shoulders both the Sutras and the staff.

Over the centuries, many have attempted to define it. Some saw it as an adaptation of Ch’an to the needs of warrior-monks. Others viewed it as a strategy for survival in an unstable world. Yet all such attempts stumble upon the essential truth: Shaolin Buddhism is not defined, it is breathed.

This first chapter delves into that breath. We are not so concerned with mapping an exhaustive chronology nor getting lost in philosophical technicalities—though we will not avoid them when they illuminate the path—but with approaching the living spirit that makes the Shaolin temple a rare flower in the garden of Dharma.

How does the silence of meditation reconcile with the roar of combat? In what way did the monks comprehend emptiness without abandoning commitment to the world?

What kind of compassion can a closed fist bear?

Here we will explore the doctrinal roots that nourish this particular vision of Awakening. We will see how sword and Sutra intertwine, how practice becomes movement, and movement becomes teaching. We will also discover the resilience forged in hard times, when fire threatened to devour the foundations, yet could not extinguish the ember burning beneath the ash.

Shaolin Buddhism is not a separate chapter in the history of schools; it is a profound echo of the human spirit seeking transcendence. It is the

fist that opens in a gesture of compassion. It is the silence that speaks with the held breath of one who waits.

It is living teaching, not on an altar, but in routine, in struggle, in the stillness that arrives once all has been understood.

This first part is, therefore, an offering. A reverence to the heart that still breathes atop the mountains.

### ***The Awakening of the Mountain: Doctrinal Roots***

The mountain does not awaken abruptly. It does not open its eyes with clamor nor shake off sleep like a reckless man at the strike of a gong. The mountain awakens in silence, just as consciousness awakens in contemplation: without intention, without seeking, it simply occurs. In terms of Ch'an Buddhism, this refers to the practice of spontaneous enlightenment—a awakening that arises not from logic or effort, but from inner clarity.

First, a subtle change in the texture of the air. Then, a mist that clears, revealing the contours of the eternal. Finally, light. A gentle, golden light, ancient as the Dharma, which does not illuminate to show, but to remind.

It is in this inaugural silence that the story of Shaolin is born. Before monks walked with shaven heads among cypresses, before staffs struck the ground like rhythmic verses, long before the name “Shaolin” entered the annals of history, its teachings were already germinating in the mountain, like seeds in fertile soil. That initial emptiness not only gave rise to the temple but also to the type of Buddhism that would flourish there: Ch'an Buddhism, where practice transcends words and action becomes teaching.

It was there, in the silent belly of the mountain, that Buddhism spread its roots.

### **A Seed from the West**

Tradition holds that it was a monk from India, called Bodhidharma, who brought the seed destined to bloom as a strange flower—resilient

to cold, yet retaining the fragrance of its origin.

But long before him, the soil was already fertile.

When Buddhism crossed the deserts and rivers of Central Asia, it did not arrive as a foreign religion, but as a weary traveler seeking rest. It did not impose its teachings; it let them fall like dew upon the stones of Taoism and the paths of Confucianism, where each drop nourished rather than eroded.

The awakening of the mountain begins there, in the subtle fusion of three currents:

the emptiness of Indian doctrine, the naturalness of the Tao, and the sense of duty breathed by Confucian ethics.

Like three rivers that do not compete to be the mightiest, but merge underground to water the roots.

### **The Root of the Dharma: Hinayana and Mahayana**

In the early centuries of dissemination, Buddhism arriving in China was as diverse as an unclassified library.

Texts of the Hinayana—the “small vehicle,” or more precisely, the “way of the Elders”—traveled alongside the scrolls of the emerging Mahayana, the “great vehicle” of the Bodhisattvas.

Shaolin drank from both springs, yet did not reproduce them verbatim. It did not build a rigid school nor recite Sutras as unquestionable dogmas.

Shaolin did what wise trees do: it absorbed the essential and filtered the superfluous.

Doctrine was not a set of rules, but a living sap that nourished practice. From the Hinayana it took rigorous ethics, attention to detail, the practice of vinaya—the code of discipline—and a taste for austere retreat. From the Mahayana, it inherited the vastness of heart, active compassion, and the notion that awakening is not a personal matter, but a shared task. Yet Shaolin was neither one nor the other. It was what arose in practice. Where others debated the nature of emptiness, the mountain monks swept the courtyard until they found it. While others debated the nature of nirvana, the Shaolin monks sought

it in every movement, in every breath between kung-fu forms. For them, emptiness was not merely an abstract idea, but a tangible experience: the fist that strikes without attachment, the kick that flows without resistance. Thus, the Dharma was not a concept, but the ground that sustained their practice.

### **Ch'an as Intuition**

What ultimately blossomed in the heart of the temple was Ch'an (Zen in Japan), that branch of Buddhism that refuses to be content with definitions, that looks at the finger pointing to the moon and says: "Not this way."

Ch'an does not argue. Ch'an observes. Ch'an waits.

And in Shaolin, that observation merged with movement.

The lotus posture was not the only flower in its garden. Kicks, palms, leaps, and falls also bloomed.

They meditated in the midst of combat—not to win, but to lose the ego.

Doctrinally, Shaolin was not a lamp, but a fire. It does not illuminate without consuming.

And the ancients knew this: everything learned without passing through the body is mere idea.

And ideas alone are not enough. For an idea cannot cross a river on foot, feed an orphan, or protect a temple from plunder.

### **Silence as the First Sutra**

At the heart of Shaolin, the first Sutra was silence.

A silence that was not the absence of words, but the presence of reality.

A silence that teaches without speaking, like smoke teaches that there was fire.

Monks did not rush to explain. In fact, when someone asked too much, the master would often respond with a glance, a gesture, or sometimes... a strike of the staff.

Not out of cruelty, but because there are truths that only awaken when

something stirs us beyond intellect.

That silence can still be heard within the temple walls today.

It is not a dead silence, but expectant.

As if every stone remembered something you also know, but have forgotten.

And it is in that forgetting where true awakening begins.

### **Ch'an and the Sword: Harmony of the Inner and Outer**

The wind slides through the pines with a whistle that could be mistaken for the song of a sword cutting the air.

And it is no coincidence. In Shaolin, steel and air have learned to move in the same rhythm. Meditation is not only stillness, and combat is not only motion; both are paths toward full presence. There, where every strike is an act of concentration and every breath an offering of silence, the boundary between spiritual and martial dissolves. It is like trying to separate the perfume from the flower—they are made for each other.

Ch'an—that current of wisdom born from silence and blossoming in intuition—found in the sword, the staff, and the body's movement, an unexpected expression of its truth. Where other temples sought emptiness in immobility, Shaolin discovered it in the blade, in the firm step, in the balance between tension and relaxation.

As if awakening were revealed not only beneath a tree but also in tracing a perfect circle with a spear under the rain.

### **The Tao of the Strike: When Technique Becomes Meditation**

In Shaolin, martial practice and meditation are not separate paths, but currents flowing in the same river. When a monk closes his fist, it is not an act of violence, but of absolute focus. When his kick rises toward the sky, it is not aggression, but a silent reverence to the heights. Every form—taolu, every sequence of movements—is more than technique: it is a prayer in motion, an invisible calligraphy that writes the story of balance without words.

And as in Ch'an, there is no fixed plan in combat. Strategies are not

repeated; one responds to the moment. Action arises not from thought, but from conceptless clarity. The trained body becomes a mirror of the mind that does not cling.

And when the enemy attacks, the true disciple does not defend, but returns the present with presence. There is no judgment, only pure action. That is the sword of Ch'an: it does not cut flesh, it cuts illusion.

## **Bodhidharma, the Immovable Guardian**

Legend has it—and sometimes legends are truer than facts—that when Bodhidharma arrived at Shaolin, he found the monks weak, drowsy, devoid of vitality. He saw them sitting in meditation like logs without sap.

To prevent the spirit from sinking into stupor, to prevent the mind from becoming mere cloud without ground, he taught exercises that activated Qi, the vital energy.

The *Yi Jin Jing*—“The Classic of Muscle and Tendon Transformation”—was not merely a gymnastics routine, but a treatise of bodily alchemy.

And the *Xi Sui Jing*, the “Marrow Washing,” was a living metaphor: to purify to the deepest core, as one cleans the inner temple with the sweat of effort.

It was then that the sword met the lotus.

And the temple ceased to be merely a retreat, becoming also a school of the present.

## **The Enemy as Teacher**

Shaolin never trained warriors in the service of power, but monks who knew how to defend compassion.

The sword was not a tool of conquest, but of Dharma protection.

And the true enemy was not the bandit, nor the invader, nor even the injustices of the world.

The true enemy was ignorance.

That is why, in wushu training, monks did not cultivate hatred, but

clarity. They did not stoke the desire to defeat, but the intention to remain awake while moving.

And thus a secret harmony arose; in every combat, the opponent became a mirror. Their attack was not a threat, but a question. And the answer was not sought—it simply was.

Like a koan:

“What is the sound of a sword that does not cut?”

And the disciple answered:

“The sigh of one who understood before striking.”

### **The Temple as a Forge of Character**

Many pilgrims came to Shaolin seeking strength. They wanted to conquer, to endure, to harden themselves. And the ancient masters, instead of teaching them to harden the body, taught them to soften the heart.

True strength does not reside in muscle, but in a spirit that does not yield without turning to stone. The training was rigorous, yes. Jumps with weights, impossible balances, postures held until the legs trembled like leaves. But behind every physical demand lay a deeper message:

“Learn to be uncomfortable without losing your center.”

“Learn to fall without losing respect for the ground.”

“Learn to win without losing humility.”

And so, in that crucible of martial practice and inner cultivation, Ch’an took form, and the sword became an extension of the calm mind.

### **A Dance Between the Edge and the Flower**

There is something poetic in watching a monk execute an ancient form among the trees.

The robe flows like a crane’s wing. Movements unfold, whether slow or explosive, with a cadence that seeks no beauty... yet reveals it. Ch’an needs no ornamentation. And neither does the sword. Yet together,

they transform combat into meditation in motion.

At Shaolin, there is no difference between sitting to contemplate a flower and striking at the perfect moment.

Both require the same: full attention, a pure heart, and a mind that does not cling.

There, and only there, true harmony between the inner and outer arises. And then the monk no longer distinguishes between the path he walks and the one that dwells within him. For, ultimately, the sharpest edge is not that of steel. It is the edge of consciousness that cuts through illusion.

### **Emptiness and Action: Essential Philosophical Concepts**

Though the mountain stands still, it is not empty. And though the river is in constant motion, it reflects the immutable. This paradox captures the very essence of Shaolin's teachings, where what appears to be a contrast—emptiness and action—reveals itself as two sides of the same coin, inseparable, complementary.

Emptiness is not the absence of things, but the potential for all things. It is like an empty bowl: because it is unfilled, it can hold water, rice, or any substance. Without that emptiness, it could not fulfill its purpose. In Shaolin, emptiness forms the foundation upon which action is built. It is the formless base from which forms arise and dissolve, like water that nourishes all things yet clings to none.

Thus, in Shaolin, emptiness is not merely a philosophical concept. It is the foundation of action, movement, thought, and being. Emptiness is not absence, but pure possibility—the space in which all that is, can be.

### **Emptiness as a Field of Possibilities**

In Ch'an practice, emptiness is experienced in the mind—not as an abstract idea, but as direct experience. In meditation, the practitioner confronts the mind, filled with thoughts that arise like waves upon an ocean. Each wave is fleeting, momentary. And in that space, where the mind empties itself of content, its true nature is revealed: not a mind

full of concepts, but a mind free of attachment.

This emptiness is not despair, but freedom. A mind empty of prejudice, of attachment, of self-imposed limits. It is a mind capable of receiving the universe without resistance. And in that openness, in that emptiness as pure receptivity, lies the true essence of action.

For in Shaolin, action is not simply movement; it is movement born from clarity, from an empty mind. One who acts from this emptiness is not conditioned by the past, nor by the fears of the future. Action becomes spontaneous, fluid, natural. Like a tree that grows without thinking of its shape, action arises effortlessly, in harmony with the moment, unguided by an ego that clings to control.

### **Combat as an Expression of Emptiness in Motion**

When a monk faces an opponent, his battle is not against another, but against the illusion of separation. Like water flowing around a rock, the monk does not attack with the intent to harm, but moves with the moment, responding without attachment to victory or defeat. Every movement is an opportunity to dissolve the ego, to act without resistance, and to find in combat the same clarity found in meditation.

A strike is not an act of aggression, but of fluidity. A movement is not a reaction to the enemy, but a response arising from emptiness. As the river does not fight the stones in its path, but flows around and through them, so the Shaolin martial artist is not a warrior, but a man of peace, acting in harmony with the world, unattached to anything.

### **Action Arising from Emptiness: Being and Doing as One**

Yet emptiness is not inaction. Emptiness is not paralysis. On the contrary, it is the field from which the purest action arises—action untainted by ego or attachment to outcome. It is effortless action, action that is not action. This is the paradox of emptiness: when one empties oneself, one becomes the channel through which all the universe's energy flows.

Imagine a monk facing a daily task: sweeping the courtyard, preparing

rice, training in the combat hall. To an outside observer, these are ordinary, mundane activities, but to the monk, they are moments of deep connection. Emptiness is not reserved for meditation alone; it can be found even in the simplest work. By emptying expectations and concerns, every action becomes a manifestation of the universe. Every gesture, even the simplest, becomes an offering. And the action itself transforms into a path to enlightenment. Thus, sweeping is not merely sweeping; it is the very act of existence, with no separation between the sweeping and the one who sweeps. Emptiness opens space for action to become an extension of being, and for being to dissolve into action.

### **The Harmony Between Emptiness and Action in Shaolin Life**

In monastic life, the balance between emptiness and action is essential. The monk does not see himself as separate from his surroundings, but as an integral part of them. The outside world is not something to dominate or control, but something to understand and harmonize with. Every daily action becomes a means to practice Ch'an, to empty the mind and fill the heart. There is never a moment when emptiness is absent. And yet, there is never a moment when action is not present either. Emptiness is not a withdrawal from the world; it is a deep understanding of it. And action is not a distraction from the mind; it is its perfect manifestation.

### **Emptiness, Action, and the Path to Wisdom**

Emptiness is therefore a gateway to wisdom, because within it dissolve all the barriers that separate human beings from the truth. Action arising from emptiness is enlightened action, for it is neither selfish nor driven by desire or aversion. It is the action of someone in contact with the whole, who knows that they do not act alone, but as part of a larger flow. Thus, Shaolin monks live this truth every day—not only in sword practice or deep meditation, but in every gesture. Emptiness and action are not opposites; they are complementary. Together, they create perfect harmony.

## **Teaching in Motion, Meditation in Combat**

The sword does not cut only flesh, but also the illusions of the ego. The Shaolin monk does not fight the opponent on the outside, but his own mind, with its fears, doubts, and desires. In combat, as in meditation, the goal is not to defeat another, but to attain peace within oneself. Every strike, every block, every movement becomes a form of introspection, a path toward clarity and understanding.

At the Shaolin Temple, combat is not a means to demonstrate physical skill or fighting prowess. It is a meditative practice, a manifestation of Ch'an integrated into the body. Combat is, in a way, the culmination of meditation in action, where body and mind become one, with no distinction between the thinker and the thought, the actor and the action itself.

### **The Sword as an Extension of Being**

At Shaolin, the sword is not a weapon of conquest, but a channel of the awakened mind. Like a brush in the hand of a calligrapher or a pen in the hand of a poet, its edge does not cut flesh, but the illusions of the ego. Every movement of the monk is a spontaneous response to the present: the body flows without resistance, action arises from clarity, and the empty mind finds in the steel the same truth found in the stillness of meditation.

In sword practice, the monk learns that true strength lies not in physical power, but in mental clarity. A single movement clears the mind of distraction and connects the practitioner to the present moment. Action ceases to be an automatic reaction of the body to external stimuli and becomes a genuine response, born from meditation itself.

Thus, in combat, the Shaolin monk faces not only the enemy, but his own mind. Attacks and defenses are not merely physical acts, but lessons in mastery over thought. Every block, every strike, every twist of the sword is an opportunity to purify the mind and reach the state of no-mind—a place where clarity flows effortlessly, and actions arise spontaneously.

## **Combat as Koan, Answer Without Answer**

In the Ch'an tradition, koans are questions without answers, designed to break the limits of logical thought and lead the mind to a state of non-duality. In a similar way, combat at Shaolin is a moving koan. In battle, there are no predetermined answers. It is not about anticipating the opponent's moves, but about being fully present in the moment, responding without thought, acting without attachment to victory or defeat.

Every encounter in combat becomes a koan, a challenge with no rational solution. The monk's mind must empty completely, allowing the body to respond intuitively, without interference from thought. It is a process of total surrender to the flow of the moment, accepting what is without forcing the outcome.

Teaching in motion is found in the ability to listen to one's own body, to feel its limits and possibilities without judgment. The monk learns not to oppose the flow of battle, but to flow with it. The sword moves not as a weapon of fighting, but as an instrument of teaching, guiding the monk toward liberation from his own fears, prejudices, and limitations.

## **Meditation in Action, Immersion in the Present**

In combat, as in meditation, the monk seeks to enter a state of deep immersion in the present. The Shaolin monk knows he cannot dwell on the past or the future; combat is lived in the now, in this instant, without distractions. The mind must be like water reflecting the sky—undisturbed, calm, and clear.

Combat is therefore not reactive action, but active meditation. While the body moves in a dance of strikes and defenses, the mind remains at peace. The monk does not identify with his body, nor with the suffering that combat may cause. He identifies with the flow of life itself, in its purest, rawest form.

This form of meditation in action is not mere control of the body, but integration of body and mind. Just as in seated meditation, where the

body becomes a vehicle for the mind, in combat the body is the medium through which the mind attains clarity and wisdom. The body is not an obstacle to overcome, but the vehicle carrying the mind toward enlightenment.

## **The Silent Teaching of Combat**

In combat, there are no words. No masters instruct, no disciples receive verbal lessons. The teaching is silent, transmitted through movement. In the exchange of strikes and defenses, the monk directly experiences the teachings of Ch'an. Every movement is a lesson in impermanence, non-duality, and the integration of inner and outer.

Strikes are not only physical attacks, but lessons the monk gives himself. In every contact, the monk confronts his own nature. In every movement, a deeper truth about himself and the universe is revealed. The sword, in its subtlest form, does not cut only flesh, but the ignorance that clouds the mind, removing ego distortions and opening space for wisdom.

Combat, then, is a practice of self-knowledge. It is a mirror reflecting the shadows of being, but also its light. The monk who practices combat at Shaolin does not fight an external enemy, but his own limitations, the mental constructs that separate him from his true nature. Every victory in combat is ultimately a victory over oneself.

## **Peace in Combat**

In the end, the true master in combat is not the one who triumphs, but the one who has attained peace. The sword is not merely a weapon of war, but a means to achieve inner tranquility. Combat is a path of transformation, where the monk frees himself from the fears and desires that bind him to the duality of the world.

When a Shaolin monk faces his opponent, he does not see himself as a fighter, but as a being on the path to enlightenment. Combat is simply the stage upon which the dance of life unfolds, where each movement becomes an opportunity to attain unity with the universe. In this sense,

combat at Shaolin is not an end in itself, but a means to the realization of the Dharma.

### **Compassion on Guard: Martial Ethics and Bodhisattvas**

The heart of Shaolin beats to the rhythm of a principle as profound as it is subtle: compassion. For the monks of this venerable temple, martial art is not merely a means of self-defense or attack, but a path to manifest virtue and the purpose of the Bodhisattva. In every action, every strike, and every block, there is an opportunity to sow goodness, to infuse the world with the energy of unconditional compassion.

### **Combat as an Expression of Compassion**

Combat in Shaolin is a paradox in itself. In martial tradition, the monk does not fight for personal victory or glory. The true purpose of combat is compassion: one fights not out of hatred or anger, but out of the desire to alleviate the suffering of others, to protect life, and to maintain balance in the world. This form of compassion is neither weak nor passive; on the contrary, it is firm, resolute, and sometimes fierce. The Bodhisattva, in the Shaolin context, is not only one who seeks enlightenment for himself, but one who commits to helping all beings achieve liberation. On the battlefield, as in daily life, the Bodhisattva's compassion manifests in the ability to protect others from harm, without causing unnecessary suffering. Every martial action, every intervention, becomes an opportunity to save lives, not to take them.

### **Ethics in the Sword**

The sword, as a symbol of power and protection, must be wielded with a profound sense of responsibility. In the hands of a true master, it does not become an instrument of destruction, but a means of transformation. The Shaolin warrior is not an executioner; he is a protector, a guardian of peace and cosmic order. And the ethics guiding his hand are the same that guide his heart.

And sometimes, before delving into its pages, it is fitting to listen to that pulse from a distance. This is the synopsis of the second volume, crafted for those who wish to glimpse the profound meaning of this new stretch of the path before continuing to walk it.

## **Shaolin, Land of Pilgrims – Volume II: The Heart of the Temple**

### **I. The Breathing Heart: Shaolin Buddhism**

Shaolin was not born with a sword nor with a Sutra, but with a deep silence. This first part invites you to discover the spiritual essence of the most famous temple in the Buddhist world, not as a spectacle or a myth, but as a living experience. Here we explore how Ch’an Buddhism—the flower without words—embodied itself in martial discipline, and how that union forged a singular path of embodied wisdom: fist and compassion, form and emptiness, meditation and movement. More than a history, this part is an immersion: a descent into the heart of a practice that transcends the extremes of retreat and combat. The reader does not just understand; they breathe with the monks, train with them, and discover that Awakening in Shaolin is not a future state, but a way of being fully present... even in the midst of a strike.

### **II. Stone, Pine, and Silence: The Mountain Monasteries**

Monasteries do not walk, but they travel. And this part follows them with the reverence of one walking barefoot on sacred ground. Here we traverse nearly 60 Buddhist monasteries in China, both the famous and the forgotten, those of imperial lineage and those lost in the mist. It is not a tourist guide: it is a spiritual geography, where each temple is

presented as a master in itself. From the sound of the gong to the stillness of the cypresses, from centuries-old murals to bowls of rice still warm, each monastery reveals itself as a poem in stone. This part is a tribute to the places where the Dharma found refuge, was persecuted, and bloomed again. A pilgrimage in words through the spaces where the eternal insinuates itself into the everyday, and where silence is not emptiness, but presence.

### **III. The Tao Dwells in Routine: Daily Monastic Life**

What happens when no one is watching? What occurs when the spotlights go out and only the gong, the cold water, the broom, and the body sweaty after training remain? This part answers unhurriedly, opening the door to the daily life of the temple, where every gesture—however humble—is a form of meditation, an offering. Awakening does not always arrive like lightning: sometimes it arrives as well-made soup, as a well-swept floor, as silence that is respected. This part shows how the true temple lies in the way of living, not in the place where one lives. An invitation to understand that the sacred does not hide behind the extraordinary, but inhabits repetition, discipline, and silent surrender.

### **IV. Masters of Mist and Sun: The Lineage as a Sacred River**

Behind every transmitted gesture, there is a preceding hand. And behind every teaching that arrives alive, there is a chain of silences, glances, sacrifices, and courage. This part honors the masters of the Shaolin lineage, both the celebrated and the invisible, those who guided with words and those who taught by remaining silent. More than a chronology, a spiritual river unfolds here, flowing from Bodhidharma

to the present without losing its music. It is not just a tribute, it is a revelation: the transmission of the Dharma is not institutional, but vibrational. Sometimes, a master is an elder serving tea in silence. Sometimes, an anonymous disciple who swept the courtyard without leaving a trace. Here their story is told, or rather, their presence. Because a lineage is not a chain of names, but a thread of light that continues to ignite in every heart that awakens.

**Books, like true paths, reveal themselves step by step.**

What you have read so far is only an antechamber, a threshold barely opened.

If you feel that this path resonates with you and wish to continue exploring its echoes, I invite you to visit my website, where you can discover the rest of this trilogy and other projects that also emerged from silence and practice:

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