

108 STEPS

The Sino-Indian Connection in the Martial Arts

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In the grafting of the Chinese arts to the culture of other societies, there is a danger that knowledge and analysis of the important Sino-Indian connection in the martial arts may be lost. The practical bent of Chinese civilization has created the richest and most diverse groups of martial techniques that have come down to us. However, in addition to indigenous Chinese techniques, the main thread of many of the components of the kung-fu systems was provided primarily by the Indian legacy of Buddhism. Taoism played a much lesser part and Confucianism played an insignificant role in the development of the martial arts. Contemporary Chinese value systems, depending on location, education and the person, involve a varying interplay of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, reverence for ancestors and in modern times Christianity, Islam or Marxism. The current essay pinpoints the nature of the bridge of Buddhism between India and China in the martial arts wherein Indian concepts were fused with Chinese techniques to create a powerful synthesis.

Buddhism, unlike Western systems, has blended harmoniously with other indigenous systems wherever it has gone in China, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, Japan and other places. Waves of Indian Buddhist missionaries crossed this bridge to China and many other lands. Except for travelers coming to India to collect Buddhist knowledge, the flow of information or knowledge was largely from India to China.

A significant infusion was in the Shaolin monastery in the Songsan Mountains in Honan province with the coming of the Bodhidharma in the first part of the sixth century. However, far too much attention is given to the Bodhidharma alone. Actually there were Buddhists in China centuries before and after the Chan of the Bodhidharma. Chan Buddhism is linked with other Indian Mahayana Buddhist schools including the Yogacara School through the Lankavatara Sutra, which was translated into Chinese around A.D. 440. Moving meditation and disciplined exercise was and is part of Buddhism itself and its mindfulness about the body. Wherever Buddhism has gone it has been a “democratic” system ignoring distinctions of race, caste and clans. The Buddhist temples really should be called early universities because they provided universal and holistic knowledge to anyone who came and was willing to learn. The Songsan mountain temple was merely the most famous—actually given the decentralized nature of Buddhism, the Honan Shaolin model provided the umbrella for many other temples including the Fukien Shaolin and one in Canton.

The Tang dynasty (A.D. 618-905) provided the heyday of early kung-fu systems. After the Tang and Sung dynasties there was a relative stagnation until the decline of the Ming and the rise of the “foreign” Ching. It was not an accident that many contemporary systems either got their start or received their revitalization in the 1600’s when there was resistance to the Ching. Most of these were Buddhist systems. Ba Qua (paqua), possibly a

non-Buddhist art, was created at a much later time. The Buddhist arts were not uniformly hard or external. Internal and external were simply blended in different ways. Buddhism is a middle way with respect to soft/hard, internal/external and even regarding violence. In India it is Jainism not Buddhism that taught absolute non-violence. Buddhism was more practical; respectful entry into the vegetable and animal worlds was necessary for life (i.e., self-defense). The distinctions between defense and killing was provided by Buddhist tests of intentions (bhavanas) including fairness, mindfulness, and compassion (karuna).

While the “signature” of Indian Buddhism is evident in many Chinese martial systems, one important litmus test of the Indian presence is the set of number concepts that have been used in the architecture of Chinese martial arts 3, 9, 12, 18, 36 and finally the umbrella of them all: 108. Praying thrice to the Buddha, the 18 hands of lohan, the 36 targets of tien hsueh, the 108 of the Yang long form and Yip Man’s compression of the Buddhist Ng Mui’s gift into 108 movements for the form are all signs of the intellectual legacy (not necessarily techniques) of Indian Buddhism. Taoist numbers (8, 64) were different. Incidentally, early Muay Thai of Thailand also had 108 movements prior to the influence of Western boxing. Scholars and writers have known that 108 has something vaguely to do with the stars but have not provided a clear link or explanation. Mature systems of thought attempt to see human activity and nature in a synthesized way. The concept of the 108 in China is distinctly Buddhist and the roots are in Indian thought, in the arts, and in astronomy (i.e., both culture and nature). The 108 captured the cyclical nature of the known universe as celestial entities returned to the center after 108 cycles. Eclipses were good examples of these cycles.

The fascination with eclipses was common to most ancient societies—particularly the cycles of lunar eclipses, which appeared to symbolize the cycles of existence. Ancient American Indians, Indians, Chinese, Assyrians and Babylonians, among others, made attempts to understand the cycles of lunar eclipses. In the Chaco site of Anasazi (ancient Southwestern Indians) civilization in New Mexico there appears to be evidence that the Anasazis knew that the cycles were a little over 18 years (18.6) in length. Methods of measurement and exact accuracy varies from civilization to civilization. The Assyrians and Babylonians called it the sharu cycle (18 years and 11 1/3 days) and Edmund Halley named it the saros cycle. Current astronomy has settled for average 18.2-year cycles.

According to Joseph Needham, the foremost historian of Chinese science, the Chinese (Han) people did not seem to be aware of the number of lunar eclipses in a saros. Also according to Needham, during the Tang times there were three clans of Indian Buddhist astronomers and calendar experts who were residents of Loyang, the Chinese capital. A culmination of this presence was the compilation by the Indian Chhuthan His-Ta of the Khai-yan Chan Ching, which was the greatest collection of astronomical work in China from the fourth-to-eighth centuries. Needham also tells us that those who wished to know the positions of the planets used the Indian calendrical methods. By the end of the Tang period the fundamental astronomical principles were set. Relative to the Tang period the fundamental astronomical principles were set. Relative to the Tang and then Sung, the astronomy of the Ming dynasty coasted on these early foundations.

The early Buddhist formulations were extensions of the earlier Hindu astronomy, and Buddhism in astronomy as well as in other sciences and arts became a filter through which selected Hindu and other Indian ideas were transmitted into many other parts of Asia, including China.

Early Buddhism and Hinduism on the basis of the study of the saros cycles proposed the cosmology of cycles of worldly creation and destruction and postulated for every 108 years.

That figure shows itself in science, methods of meditation, in literature, art, dance and the martial arts. The astronomical common denominators include: a little over 18 years constitutes one (saros) cycle of lunar eclipses; each eclipse was visible in a different place; three cycles of eclipses would bring the eclipse in roughly the same place; however, six cycles would not only result in the full eclipse being seen in the same longitude, but the alignments would be most harmonious, with Jupiter being in the same place and the eclipse most clear, complete and focused. Therefore, 108 eclipses constituted a complete cycle in the Buddhist and Hindu worlds. The Indian symbolism of the 108 was therefore transplanted to China and was not indigenous to Taoist or Confucian thought.

Indian culture, literature, religion and the arts are thoroughly inundated with the importance of 108. The computations and correlations were diverse. The astronomer Vara Mihira, a contemporary of the Bodhidharma, thought that Zodiacal man (Kalapurusa or the Time-person) had 108 padas (feet or extremities). Relationships between various astronomical concepts pointed toward the harmony of 108. Thus 27 asterisms each with four feet gave us 108. Twelve zodiacal signs or navamsas each with nine feet gave us 108.

In the Indian epic Ramayana there are 108 offerings that Ram was supposed to make and the earlier orally transmitted Ramayana through disciplined oral transmission is 3,000 years old. Carefully transmitted oral versions of classics were put into writing after the introduction of writing in India around the eighth century B.C. There are 108 beads for meditational purposes in Indian Hindu and Sino-Indian Buddhist necklaces. There are 108 lamps in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. There are 108 fundamental steps in the purest Indian classical dance known as “bharat natyam.” Each posture has a specific hand seal or “mudra.” Mudras in classical Indian culture were symbolic syntheses of both creation and destruction. Thus Lord Shiva as Nataraja—the lord of the Dance of Life is symbolically and continuously creating and destroying the world. If one sees the figure of the Nataraja, a careful Wing Chun person will see the equivalent of bong sau and bong gurk in one hand and one foot position. Both are balanced postures and composed preludes to peace or destruction. One of the most famous mudras or hand seals in very early pre-Vedic Tantric Hinduism and later in Buddhism is the abhaya mudra, which can be a balanced symbol of blessing (fear not) or self-defense (wu sau) or its extensions (jing jeong). In Indian martial arts such as the south Indian kalaripayit there are 108 strikes to various nerve centers.

The early Indian and Buddhist fascination with 108 extends to its constituent parts. Three is an important number (three gems), so is six (3 x 2), nine (3 x 3), 12 (12 Nidanas) and 18. Nine extensions on each side give us 18, which parallels the notion of the “18 hands of Lohan,” Wheels in Buddhist symbolism at one time would have 18 spokes, and multiples of 18. The wheel is the principal symbol of the feet of the early Buddhas and they evolve into 108 symbols on the feet of “Phrahat” or Siamese footprints of the Buddha. The wheel is, in part, a symbol of the sun and on important days in Tibetan Buddhism on an iron stand 108 lamps are rotated. Similarly prayer wheels turn in the direction of the sun.

One hundred eight was also regarded as an example of harmony because a wide set of combination and calculations would lead to 108. The number absorbs both odd and even numbers. It can be divided by two or three. The number three itself is a sum of the odd and the even; therefore it represents the notion of flow. In the martial arts (including Wing Chun) punching by three allows one to flow and start alternatively from either side. Consider some of the many symmetries: $1^1 \times 2^2 \times 3^3 = 108$, $4 \times 27 = 108$, $6 \times 18 = 108$, $9 \times 12 = 108$.

Einstein once said that human nature always has tried to form a simple and synoptic image of the surrounding world. The architecture of 108 was an important part of the synoptic and cosmological Buddhist view of nature and all its cultural counterparts including the martial arts.

This synoptic view was there in the Shaolin Temple with the coming of the Bodhidharma followed by colonies of Buddhist astronomers and missionaries. Bodhidharma arrived in Shaolin near Loyang around A.D. 500 shortly after the construction of the Shaolin Temple. Subsequently astronomers, monks and missionaries were also known to be in nearby Loyang capital of the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618-905). By A.D. 500 Loyang had over 500,000 people including foreigners. Buddhism took a deep hold during the Tang dynasty and the Sino-Indian bridge was forged. Three hundred Indian monks lived in Loyang at one time. The influence of Buddhism spread in many cultural expressions. It is important to note that in martial arts history, both in Korea and Okinawa, the Chinese martial arts influence came under the label tang-te (the tang hand). It is Japanese action under Funakoshi that changed the symbol tang-te to kara-te (from tang hand to empty hand), thereby obscuring the early Buddhist roots in China and through Shaolin to India. The Japanese compensated for the loss of the architecture of 108 steps in Japanese Zen with the rigid discipline of the dojo, the sensei and the forms. These differences between the northern and southern Chan remains with us today in Chinese kung-fu and Japanese karate.

The role of Indian Buddhism in the martial arts goes beyond China to Japan and Southeast Asia. Bodhidharma's Buddhism was Chan Buddhism (Dhyana in Sanskrit, Zhan in Pali) and is well-known in Indian Buddhism. Chan Buddhism minimized the role of recitation of sutras and emphasized the importance of appropriate experience. Bodhidharma, according to tradition, however was fond of the Lankavatara Sutra which de-emphasizes ritualism. The Lankavatara Sutra repeatedly refers to the 108 steps. The Japanese Zen

scholar D.T. Suzuki, in his editing comments, was puzzled by the reference to 108. He translates the Sanskrit word “pada” as “statement.” The word can also mean an extension or step.

Perhaps part of the reason for Suzuki’s puzzlement is that Japanese Zen is a spinoff from a southern Chan School. Chan Buddhism developed two versions: Northern and Southern. The Southern school tended to emphasize the instantaneity of enlightenment and the emphasis on the 108 steps eroded. However Buddhism played a crucial role in the Japanese martial arts. As Taisen Deshimaru points out in *The Zen Way to the Martial Arts*: “Martial arts plus Zen equals Japanese Budo.” Buddhism points to the need for the appropriately focused mind to direct technique, power and timing in the martial arts as in any of the other arts. While Taoism points toward some of the same effortlessness, Buddhism goes much further, in that Buddhist discipline constantly prepares us for death since there are no permanent entities. The true warrior at all times must be prepared in spirit for death if it comes: otherwise the clinging to life or any specific technique or entity can get in the way of the flow. The “no-mind mind” must direct the mindfulness of each act. The 108 steps and the centering merely prepare us for our individual journey.

The Chinese tai chi classics also emphasize that mindfulness is important in the martial arts. The tai chi chuan’s fundamental key points (see Yang Gwing Ming) say that the mind must direct the energy and send it where it is needed as “where yi (the mind) is, chi is.” While chi was well-known in early China for a variety of purposes including massage and acupuncture, the directing of the chi by the mind is a Buddhist conception analogous to the direction of “Prana” in India. The yogi and the kung-fu master are therefore brothers under the skin since they are both concerned about the direction of energy. Writers sometimes fail to realize that Buddhist and Hindu yoga have moving meditation. The static positions are preludes to controlled and mindful action. Chen tai chi has a static chi kung stance and the first form of wing chun has a sunken static stance. Yoga teachers particularly under Brahminic influences sometimes over-emphasize meditation and neglect the cultivation of the body. But pre-Vedic Tantric Hinduism and later Tantric Buddhism emphasized that the body cannot be neglected. Getting the body to do the command of the “no-mind mind” was crucial. Physical culture was part of the learning that took place in Buddhist temples and “universities” in India and China.

Given his childhood upper caste background in Kanchipur in Southeast India, Bodhidharma was exposed to the martial arts and carried his martial knowledge supplemented with static and dynamic yoga into the Buddhist phase of his life. In any case the waves of Buddhists who came to China in the wake of the Bodhidharma would have had the sublimation of crude violence and strength through appropriate martial exercise as a part of temple life and education. Buddhist monks took care of themselves and traveled from Northern, Southern and Eastern India. The latter groups followed the ocean route to Canton, sometimes stopping on the Vietnamese coast along the way. Bodhidharma apparently first stopped in Canton before heading north after crossing the Yangtze River in a reed raft or boat along the way. A common misunderstanding has it that he crossed the river on a reed. Symbolic language sometimes is mistranslated literally, particularly with Chinese symbols. A 1,000-year-old egg is not necessarily buried for a 1,000 years.

The martial arts of Southeast Asia deserve separate treatment because of the diversity of Southeast Asia. But the Indian influences are clearly there: sometimes as Buddhist (Thailand and Vietnam), sometimes as Hindu (Bali) and at other times as Moslem (other parts of Malaysia and Indonesia).

The Indian martial arts declined with the coming of the British. The British also recruited Indians from martial arts groups, de-emphasized individuality and made regiments out of them and transferred their skills to the use of modern arms except for the Gurkhas, and their individualistic use of the kukhri which is still used in Nepal and parts of Eastern India and is known as “bhojali.” Bits and pieces of martial arts still exist in India as the kalaripayit, maramarri, kushti, lathi (stickfighting), vajra-musthi (lightning fist) and sikh sword and kirpan work. Indians from the Vedic traditions kept the yoga portion of the earlier traditions and began to use the integration of the body, martial technique and the mind. The decline of Buddhism in India and Buddhist teaching centers also contributed to this erosion. Buddhism has always been committed to the search for the middle way between body and mind, self-denial and self-indulgence: in a more thorough-going way than Taoism. If one looks at the turning Buddhist swastika in a circle one can see that the turning swastika absorbs the yin/yang imagery.

Yet another aspect of the Indian Buddhist influence is in the conception of the human center: what the Chinese martial artist calls the dan tien. The dan tien is exactly the same as the manipoora—the third complex, wheel or “chakra” in ancient Tantric pre-Vedic, pre-Buddhist India. Buddhism became the vehicle for the transmission of this concept to East Asia. The dan tien (manipoora) is one of six centers each with its unique individuality, function and method of energizing. The manipoora is the abode of shanti (peace) by the gathering and settling of energy. Only when the shanty (inner calm) manipoora/diamond stage is achieved, is the energy (prana/chi) raised eventually to the eyebrow level in the head. Early Tantra and Kundalini also characterized energy in terms of coiled serpent at the base of the spine (tail bone or muladhara). Both in Kundalini, tai chi, and in wing chun, the tail bone is tucked in at a certain time so that coiled energy can be directed from the dan tien/manipoora to the center. Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism, Chen tai chi and wing chun systems understand that the spine has to be straight (hanging from a string) so that circling, uncoiling, spiraling energy can move efficiently through the joints to be sent straight out. Circles and lines are not necessarily contradictory principles in certain contexts.

The concepts of centering related to “108,” the emphasis on non-dualism with respect to body and mind, the notion of mindful and moving meditation, the breathing, preparedness for death, the mudras or hand seals, some weapons including staffs and tridents, and self-defense rather than winning the fight, are examples of the Indian Buddhist infusion into the completion of mature Asian fighting systems. Good martial art is more than competition, acrobatics, technique, power and speed. The yi must still properly direct the chi.

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