

**MARTIAL ARTS AS A PATH OF SELF-REALIZATION:  
MEANINGS, VALUES, AND EXPERIENCES  
IN A GROUP OF ITALIAN PRACTITIONERS\***

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**Introduction**

In the last decades the phenomenon of martial arts has acquired more and more popularity in the West, being assimilated by people's collective imaginary under different perspectives, from self-defense techniques to mystical attraction, from sport to spiritual path of self-realization. While Japanese martial arts styles first appeared in Western countries by means of American movies with a consequent gradual proliferation of schools, both in the US and Europe, Chinese martial arts also known as *Kung Fu* started to appear on the scene since the 1970s under the influence of Chinese cinematographic production, whose most famous figure is represented by Bruce Lee.

Despite an increasingly interest toward martial arts among Western countries, accompanied by a conspicuous production of books and other material regarding technical features and origin of certain styles, written in most cases by masters of a

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specific lineage or school, only a few academic studies have considered this phenomenon in its wholeness. Works in anthropological literature on this matter mainly focused on the peculiar ritualistic structure of martial arts practice, but not much has been told about the contents concerning what martial artists experience on a personal level.

In this paper I examine how martial arts are experienced by a group of Italian people, what position the practice assumes in their lives, attempting to define common elements that characterize the group, with special regard to practitioner's ideas, life's style, interactions in the everyday life, personal perceptions and beliefs on a spiritual level.

I argue that although the variety of positions and representations, according to which each person conceives the discipline in his or her own way, martial arts, especially when practiced continuously under the supervision of qualified teachers, represents an educational path characterized by a deep involvement of its practitioners on different levels. Such involvement, as emerged from participated observation and interviews, is manifested along a continuum that goes from a better awareness of the body to a spiritual self-cultivation, making martial arts, unlike any ordinary sport experience, a peculiar bodily practice that carries on a traditional symbolism.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Attempting an anthropological study of traditional martial arts, as they are practiced in modern societies, requires first of all the recognition of its complexity, due to the increasing interest toward these disciplines around the world, but also to magic and mystic meanings they frequently tend to be associated with. Even though the purpose of practicing martial arts in modern societies may be much different compared to the past, they basically encompass three main components: the artistic element that is expressed through the performance of codified forms and the ritualistic structure of lessons; bodily techniques that can be used for self-defense, but at the same time improve health conditions; traditional meanings and symbols they carry on, especially in light of cultural globalizing tendencies. For this reason, it is possible to study this phenomenon under

different perspectives, depending on the aspects we want to emphasize, whether we decide to consider the historical process or isolated situations in modern societies.

As different aspects of the phenomenon can be emphasized, a definition itself of martial arts presents some difficulties, with the result of slightly different conceptions based on the cultural background of scholars who approach this study, and, on their specific interests. In general, there is a common consensus in conceiving Chinese traditional martial arts not only as a system of bodily techniques usable for self-defense, but also as ancient disciplines directly connected with deeper dimensions such as the sacred, the spiritual, and the transcendent<sup>1</sup>. For example, Anthony Schmieg (2005) emphasizes the artistic character of martial arts, arguing that, although the Chinese term *wu shu* (武術) reminds on meanings related to war and military techniques, this doesn't account for their traditional symbolism they carry on, in fact, as he states, “what elevates high Chinese martial techniques from fighting to an ‘art’ is the insertion of the Daoist principle of unity” (Shmieg 2005:18).

David Jones (2002), in the introduction of an anthropological study on martial arts, which includes contributions from various scholars interested in this subject, attempted to provide a comprehensive definition of the discipline, noticing that, even though the adjective “martial” is associated with military profession or war, they cannot be considered mere fighting techniques. Among those elements that distinguish martial arts from combat methods, the author suggests a prearranged and choreographed activity that can be repeated in different times, the emphasis on hand-to-hand techniques, the ritualistic repetition of a stylized set of movements, special drills and techniques, sparring, entertainment, an animistic component, different rank's levels, and connections with social elites (Jones 2002:XI-XII). In the same work, Klens-Bigman (2002:3) underlined those elements in a typical martial arts' lesson that make it similar to a ritual: students bowing in front of the master, the disposition of master (in front) and students who line up in rank order, and a bowing ritual that may be performed for the school's tradition or the specific martial system, the master, and in some cases the weapons. The author suggests that these ritualistic practices serve the function of creating a special

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<sup>1</sup> With the term Chinese martial arts I refer here to those traditional styles that have incorporated Daoist principles of self-cultivation.

space out of the everyday life, that stimulates a form of self-expressive performance among students, redefining their identities and relationships while sharing group's values. According to the previous works, then, we can see that the ritualistic structure of a lesson together with the creation of a particular space during the performance is a fundamental aspect in an anthropological study of martial arts. Anyway, the similarity existing between lesson and ritual process, with the consequent creation of a special dimension disconnected from the ordinary social organization, is not the only characteristic observable among group's practitioners. In my opinion, interpersonal dynamics between practitioners, in terms of interpersonal relations, bodily experiences, and spiritual dimension, also need to be considered. In order to better understand how such elements give particular meanings to the practice of martial arts, I intend to present here two main theoretical contributions. On one side, Turner's idea about ritual and performance, constitute a valid model for approaching the study of group's inter-dynamics and the articulation of a typical lesson. On the other side, the work elaborated by the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger provides appropriate coordinates for interpreting the spiritual dimension of martial artists.

### ***Communitas and Liminality in Turner's Theory***

Turner vastly contributed to the study of ritual, performance, and social modalities, then, given the aforementioned similarity between ritual and martial arts performance, it is useful to briefly examine his cardinal ideas. Referring to ritual process, Turner (1982:25) develops the concept of transition, noticing how the passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a parallel movement in space, usually by crossing of a threshold, representing a line of distinction between one area associated with the subject *preliminal* (pre-ritual) status, and another associated with the subject *postliminal* (post-ritual) status. The author emphasizes the ambiguous character of *liminality*, an anonymous condition, which carries on the potential seeds for the construction of new meanings and interrelationships, in fact, as he writes, "in mid-transition the initiands are pushed as far toward uniformity, structural invisibility, and anonymity as possible" (Turner 1982:26).

Another central idea in Turner's theory is represented by a dualistic model of social life, consisting of two social modalities: *social structure* and *communitas*. The first refers to a system of social relationships and statuses, represented by institutions and structural positions, which are organized according to a hierarchical order. The second is defined as an unstructured and relatively undifferentiated community, or a communion of individuals lead by the authority of an elder. In other words, whereas social structure is a static system clearly defined, *communitas* is a dynamic state related to marginal categories and outsiders, which Turners recognizes in shamans, diviners, mystics, medium, priests, hippies and others.

In Turner's thought *liminality* and *communitas* represent the "anti-structure", intended here neither as an opposite dimension of the social structure, nor as a refusal of societal rules and necessities. In fact, according to the author, the "anti-structure" represents a potential space for generating new changes and meanings, as he writes:

It is the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group such as a family, lineage, clan, tribe, nation, etc., or of affiliation with some pervasive social category such as class, caste, sex or age-division (Turner 1982:44).

It emerges, then, the aspect of potentiality that can be found in *communitas*, wherein prophets and artists, for the very fact that are on the *liminal* or marginal stratum of the society, can enter into vital relations with other people. As Turner puts it, "in their productions we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure" (1969:128).

According to Turner, the condition of marginality or *liminality*, that, as we have seen before, characterizes *communitas* and the anti-structure of rituals, is frequently associated with the generation of myths, symbols, and works of art. Even though these forms of expression can be used to reclassify reality or people's relationships to society, nature, and culture, they are more than classifications, for they lead individuals to both action and thought (Turner 1969:129).

### ***Religion as a Chain of Memory***

The work “*Religion as a Chain of Memory*” (2002) elaborated by the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger provides a framework of those social phenomena, that for their very characteristics, present affinities with ancient traditional forms of religious expression. Moving from the concept of religion to the one of *religiosity*, intended here as a human attitude toward spiritual dimensions of life, the author notices how certain collective experiences, which maintain a sort of continuation with the past, can replace in modern societies the role exerted by religious institutions. In fact, according to Hervieu-Léger, certain forms of collective movements, which imply a particular belief and a reference to the authority of a tradition, involve the construction of “chains of memory”, establishing a sort of continuity between the present and the past. As she puts it:

Tradition is not simply a repetition of the past in the present...in all societies where the past asserts its authority, and in the spheres of societies that are moving into modernity where this authority is still dominant, the distinctive mark of tradition is to actualize the past in the present, to restore to human lives as they are lived the living memory of an essential core which gives it existence in the present (Hervieu-Léger 2002:88).

Consequently, even in modern historical circumstances we can observe the emergence of religious traits, as certain movements recreate a tradition, whose forms become crystallized either in various schools and methods, or in the individuals’ embodiment of bodily practices. In this sense, the source of religiosity in the modern context, is represented by individuals attempt to search for life’s meaning in terms of self-reconstruction of meaning. In fact, according to the author, individuals’ experiences mediate the subjective reconstruction of meaning by establishing a chain of belief, as she writes:

The religious reference to a chain of belief affords the means of symbolically resolving the loss of meaning that follows from heightened tension between the unrestrained globalization of social phenomena and the extreme fragmentation of individual experience (Hervieu-Léger 2002:166).

The condition aforementioned basically assumes that individuals in modern societies, in which the leading role of religious institutions is being substituted by a privatization or

individualization of religion, are facing a general loss of meaning. Nevertheless, it seems that those experiences, which are connected with traditional symbolism and re-establish, in modern times, a continuation of the authoritative role of tradition through a chain of belief, provide individuals with patterns of self-realization. Such a condition, which reminds on the sacred, spiritual, and transcendent, as the ultimate experiences of life, can be observed in all social phenomena that re-actualize traditional meanings. In this sense, the embracement of traditional martial arts represents a valid example of meaningful experience.

## Setting and Methods

My fieldwork has been carrying out at a martial arts school in Prato, one of the major cities of Tuscany (a central region of Italy), with a group of people who practice Chinese martial arts styles. The group is led by Italian teachers under the supervision of master Chang Wei Shin, son of the Taiwanese grandmaster Chang Dsu Yao (張祖堯), who moved to Italy in 1974, where he started teaching traditional Chinese styles. The school, which comprehends different groups among Italy, is affiliated with the International Federation of Chinese National Art (中華國術國際聯盟總會) and it offers courses of traditional styles of *Shaolin Quan* (少林拳) and *Tai Ji Quan* (太極拳). Moreover, masters and instructors aim at divulging the study of traditional Chinese martial arts in connection with Buddhist and Daoist principles and traditional Chinese cultural elements. One of the instructors, Giacomo Lucarini, even created a website ([www.kuoshu.net](http://www.kuoshu.net)), which not only provides information about the school and the styles there taught, but also, it collects various articles written by practitioners and specialists in this sector, comprehending a vast array of Chinese cultural elements traditionally associated with martial arts. By now, this website constitutes one of the most important referential sources in Italy for people interested in martial arts' subjects and related topics in Chinese culture.

The first approach with the group turned out a quite smooth process, obviously facilitated by the teacher's availability in collaborating with me, which they had already manifested the first time I had contacted them. As by the first entry into the school I didn't know

anyone, I initially had an encounter with Luigi Moscato, martial artist of Judo and owner of the school wherein classes of different disciplines take place. Since I happened to go to the school on the same day the group chosen for my research had lesson, I also met instructor Giacomo Lucarini, and master Claudio Manenti, respectively in charge of courses of *Shaolin Quan* and *Tai Ji Quan*. After a brief introduction of myself and my purpose for being there to group's practitioners, I planned to start my research through a direct observation of their lessons, arranging interviews in a second period, during the summer vacation, period in which almost every school in Italy is closed.

By my first entry into the school, some practitioners expressed curiosity for what I was doing and for the reason I had chosen their group as the focus of my research. The teachers very kindly showed me their availability, encouraging me to ask them any questions I could elaborate along the time I would have spent with them. Not only, while sitting down during the lessons taking notes and observing the structure and organization of a typical lesson's session, the teachers always explained to me what kind of exercise they were doing, its function and its Chinese traditional name.

Moreover, after a few encounters, instructor Giacomo invited me to actively participate at their lessons, and this gave me the opportunity to closer interact with some people, trying both the exercises in couple and by myself. Then, after the lessons, the instructor often remained there just to tell me about his previous experience in the school, the championship they participated at in the past, like the famous one that takes place in Taiwan every four years. In addition both the instructor and the elder master often talked of grandmaster Chang, his son, who is now in charge of the supervision of different schools in Italy in order to continue the father's commitment, and many other issues connected with the discipline.

Conversations with the teachers on one side, and direct interactions with the practitioners on the other, allowed me to start building a gradual and deeper relationship with the all group, letting them understand that I wasn't there to judge the contents of their teachings or even worse the validity of what they had to say. On the opposite, I was grateful to them for having given me the opportunity to sharing my knowledge and maybe developing together a future cooperative relation.

It is in this kind of context that I entered the group, establishing good connections with its members, facilitated, partly, by the curiosity that especially someone manifested toward my research, and, partly, by my pleasure for sharing certain topics and experiences with Italians, who maybe were posing similar questions to the ones that inspired my research.

## **Why Choosing Martial Arts?**

### **Some Considerations Regarding Practitioner's Motivations**

As manifested by the rapid increase on global scale of a collective interest toward Chinese martial arts, frequently accompanied by the assimilation and incorporation of philosophical and religious principles traditionally connected with these disciplines, more and more people in Western countries have now the possibility of selecting various courses among a multitudes of schools.

The choice of enrolling at a martial arts course stems from different reasons, depending on one's own life experiences, knowledge, expectations, and availability of schools in the area, nevertheless, as emerged from my fieldwork data, there is a general curiosity toward the world of martial arts among practitioners, that tend to be deepened along time through a further research of information

First, we can observe how the initial *curiosity toward martial arts is frequently alimented by movies under the collective imaginary created in Western countries about bodily disciplines*. In fact, it is usually under the wave of Chinese Kung Fu movies or more recent documentaries about martial arts and their cardinal cites of development, such as Shaolin Temple (少林寺) or Wudang Mountains (武當山), that people establish the first contact with these disciplines, a curiosity that moves many of them to try courses in the school near where they live. The influential effect of movies on the choice of martial arts frequently appears at the beginning of the conversation. For example when asked what brought him to martial arts, Francesco, who has practiced for five years comments:

Talking about Kung Fu you see movies like those with Bruce Lee, you have a kind of mystic attraction, then I decided to come here.

Even more concisely, Duccio, who has learned martial arts for five years, introducing what initially influenced his choice says:

I used to watch the movie 'The Boy in the Golden Kimono'.

Someone express doubts in explaining how this curiosity came out, as if the motivation that led to the approach of martial arts is not a valid one, like the little interruption found in Marco's expression when he says:

I approached Kung Fu because...well it will sound strange but I used to watch documentaries wondering how it would be in reality, wondering how it would be to practice it, then I started to look for information about schools in my area.

It is interesting to notice that is not infrequent to find previous experiences of sports in the personal stories of martial artists, in particular football soccer, as it constitutes the most popular sport in Italy. Well, those practitioners who used to play football soccer refer of having abandoned their previous sports in order to find something more meaningful in terms of personal realization. This fact shows that *general dissatisfaction encountered in previous sports, can move practitioners to look for something else, like a discipline of martial arts*. On the extreme level, such dissatisfaction can be manifested with a tone of regrets for having wasted time, like when Stefano, who has practiced for 2 years, talking about his previous experience with football soccer says:

I've been playing soccer for one year even though during that year I always wanted to learn martial arts, so now it should be my third year of martial arts, a whole year wasted.

The same discourse might be referred also to other sports, for example Simona started practicing *Tai Ji Quan* because of a physical problem that occurred during her previous experience of running bike and forced her to rest for a while looking for a different bodily discipline.

Usually people, who after the first months are willing to continue attending lessons, engage themselves in a research process of information, in order to overcoming the first idea they initially had about the discipline practiced. This represents an attempt of

moving beyond the stereotypic assumptions rooted in the collective imaginary, with the aim of deepening one's personal understanding of martial arts, their origins, and their religious-philosophical principles they were traditionally associated with. In this sense then, *the consequent research of material (books, website, friend's suggestions) in order to deepen the knowledge of various martial arts styles, is a further development of the initial curiosity manifested in the first approach to the discipline.* For example Alessio, a forty-seven years old man, who has practiced different styles of martial arts, tells that he started when he was very young "by collecting photos of martial artists from the magazines", moving from there toward a more detailed research of information. Another member, Francesco, talking of his first entry into this field, explains his desire for attaining a better knowledge in this way:

After the first five or six months I started to search online information regarding what I was doing...I quickly understood that it wasn't the real authentic Shaolin from the temple, rather deeper styles, something imported by the grandmaster who really liked to teach, and this inspired me to learn with more willingness, to remain in this field.

The development of an initial curiosity into a further research of material is also expressed by an experience quite common among group's members, such as the one of Francesco who says:

I had searched for Kung Fu online and I found the website of Giacomo (instructor and creator of the website), then I started reading something, looking for information, and I tried the first lesson in order to experience how it was.

In sum, group's members approach martial arts either for an initial curiosity and attraction toward Eastern cultures, or because of a general disappointment with their previous sportive experiences. The consequent desire, for deepening their knowledge of characteristics and origin of the style taught at the school they have chosen, can be considered as a step forward toward the embracement of a discipline, that implies for its practitioners a great involvement on different levels of their daily life. This involvement is reinforced by other elements that characterize the group here examined, elements that will be taken into account in the next sections.

## **Sharing a Common Space: Interpersonal Dynamics between Group's Members**

The setting created during my participant observation facilitated closer interactions with both practitioners and teachers, in fact there were many occasions (before or after a lesson) for exchanging with group's members some points of view regarding the practice of martial arts. In addition I had a few chances to join dinners and other encounters out of the school. Both participant observation and interviews revealed a group fundamentally built on unity, wherein relationships between members are characterized by a constant exchange of ideas and opinions. *The group is experienced as a very cohesive and very familiar environment, a space wherein experiences, ideas, suggestions can all be shared, and in the name of which members are willing to help each other.*

Such characteristic can be firstly perceived by the relationships between the instructor, who invited me to actively participate at his course, and group's members. There is a frequent circulation of information between both sides, in fact, the instructor uses his website to collect written contributions on various matters about Chinese martial arts and Chinese traditional culture. Moreover, during dinners and stages organized by the school, members have the possibility of discussing and exchanging ideas about the discipline and the organization of their courses with their teachers.

One of the most evident expressions, about special interrelationships within the group, is given by the word *clan* used by Mirko, who has practiced for around five years, as it best exemplifies the idea of cohesiveness when he says:

The name given to our group is Kung Fu clan...we are a clan, a very cohesive group, at the same time very heterogeneous either for the age or for other characteristics.

Closeness between practitioners is perceived from the beginning, like Cecilia, who, referring to the other members' attitude by the time she entered the group, she says:

They are very nice, you ask them something and they explain it to you.

Other descriptions of group's unity refer to the change of the conditions between being helped and helping others, like the one reported by Stefano:

Those who have practiced for longer time than me always help me to improve myself and I always listen to them, from my side I try to help the new comers.

It is not improbable that this kind of environment might at first constitute a little obstacle for someone, in fact, *the great cohesiveness, established in the relationships between practitioners, might be perceived by new comers as a major distance between them and the rest of the group.* For example, when talking about his first experience in the group, Francesco says:

At first I had some difficulties because it is a very united group, you know, entering a group like this is always not so smooth, anyway they welcome new people, they don't refuse anyone, actually they always consider you as a member, letting you become a part of what they do, even with dinners, stages etc...and this is a good thing.

From this declaration we can see that after becoming a member of the group, it takes time to get fully integrated in the new environment, nevertheless, it seems that the new practitioner can go through the all process without relevant problems, as he or she is welcomed and supported by other members.

Referring to practitioners' previous sportive experiences, it is interesting to notice that *although members are very close to each other, here we find a different cohesiveness compared to team-sports like football soccer.* At this regard, there are various comments about the differences, which characterize the group of martial artists, compared to the one of football soccer, most of the times based on practitioner's personal experiences. Bringing out this kind of comparison, Francesco explains:

I learned that here, at least in this school, what you do is only yours, in other words, it is the result of your effort.

The individual character of the practice of martial arts is expressed also by another member, who used to play football soccer, in fact, Duccio underlines the difference encountered in the two groups:

It is a quite individual practice, comparing it with a team-sport like football soccer, in soccer they pursue a common purpose, if someone once do less all other members complain with him or her, here if someone once do less it is one's own decision, one's own business, it is a different cohesion.

In short then, the group is characterized by mutual comprehension and support, a common space that encourages interactions between each other and wherein its members are willing to sharing their experiences. At the same time, the practice is first of all an experience lived on a personal level, as each member can put more or less effort during a lesson without necessarily effecting others' training. Here we can observe how the group provides practitioners with a potential space for generating new changes and meanings, an undifferentiated communion of individuals, who refer to the general authority of their lineage elders and teachers. In this sense, the group is more similar to what Turner defines as *communitas*, a space characterized by homogeneity and sacredness, which is separated, but at the same time interferes with the outer secular social structure.

Directly connected with this modality of social relationships are personal perceptions, regarding bodily sensations encountered during the practice, which contribute to the creation of a special dimension disconnected from the ordinary experience, whose characteristics will be discussed in the following section.

## **The “Other” Dimension in the Performance**

A frequently reported experience connected with the practice of martial arts is a special subjective perception of space and time during the lesson, which can be described as an increased attention on the teachings accompanied by a more acute awareness of the body. *During the lessons practitioners create a special space disconnected from the outer world, frequently defined as a particular dimension in which everyone focuses on his or*

*her own body*. At this regard we can find explicit declarations such as the one of Duccio who says:

Two hours basically dedicated to focusing on my body.

Similarly, Mirko describes his experience during a lesson using the term *dialogue with my body* and he says:

To equilibrate body, mind, and spirit, this is my personal dimension during a lesson...to think, realizing that you still have to work very hard to execute a certain movement! But this is marvelous, to feel raising harmony from your movements without thinking...there are not useless movements, as in the Universe, it's here that all what you do acquires a more profound meaning.

Yet other descriptions further show how focusing on body and movements becomes the main purpose during a lesson. Indeed, sometimes it is the repetitiveness of movements together with a high concentration that keep practitioners focusing exclusively on the execution of a form composed of a sequence of movements or other exercises. In this sense the body becomes the point of departure from ordinary thoughts and mental projections, restricting the spatial and temporal dimensions to the *hic et nun*. For example Stefano says:

When I practice I don't think about other issues, as soon as I finish I start thinking where a I have to go, what I want to buy, but when I'm there I tend to forgetting about what I have to do later, and I think this is good as you can concentrate even more.

On a more extreme level practitioners also refer of experiences of detachment during the training, giving the idea of a space out of the everyday life, in which identities and bodily confines are reshaped, like the one of Guido, who has practiced for around six years:

During a training I perceive a different dimension from the outer world, I have the sensation of *separation* as if it was a different world...sometimes I perceive abstraction.

Similarly Claudia says:

I often perceive detachment from the outer world when I practice various movements...you enter in a different atmosphere.

These kinds of experiences are not reported by every member, someone expressed a certain grade of difficulty in concentrating during a lesson, especially those who attend *Tai Chi* course, which requires more calm and capacity of keeping the attention on slower movements. Moreover, the increased awareness of bodily perceptions and the consequent reshape of body's confines, seem to emerge along time in connection with the gradual advancement along the training.

Similarly to the modality of social relations previously examined, the dimension experienced by individuals during the practice, further support the anti-structured form of group's space, characterized by the sacred in opposition to the outer secular social structure. Moreover, we might think that the dimension created during a lesson, represents on a bodily level, a sort of transition or passage from the subject's previous status (the one normally recognized in the social structure) to a new status (the one acquired during the dynamic process of a lesson). To put it differently, the ritualistic structure of a lesson, accompanied by particular bodily experiences, reminds of ritual process and *liminality*, a concept elaborated by Turner in order to address the passage or transition from the subject's pre-ritual status and post-rituals status. In this sense, similarly to the condition of *liminality*, the special dimension created during the practice, presents an ambiguous character, which carries on the potential seeds for the construction of new meanings and interrelationships.

If not all practitioners can find during the lesson a special dimension disconnected from the outer world, basically everyone talks of the beneficial effects in terms of healthiness related to the discipline. These effects and other significant variables, connected with a different perception of the body after a period of practice, will be examined in the next section.

## **Bodily Discipline and Wellbeing: Most Significant Changes on a Personal Level**

Interviews conducted with group's members clearly show how the constant and continuous practice of martial arts can significantly improve their quality of life. Indeed, beneficial effects are often attributed as a consequence of the training carried out along time, with different grades of improvement depending on individuals' experiences. Although such beneficial effects are expressed in different terms and under different angles, depending on martial artists personal convictions and life's stories, they overall cover various aspects of the person, conceived here under a holistic perspective.

First, *every practitioner, included the master and the instructor, reported evident improvements in their physical conditions, a greater physical resistance, better awareness of the body, and healthier body in general.* These conditions accompany various stages of the practice by means martial artists deepen the way they think and elaborate their bodies, realizing that they become more and more healthier. Not only, but also the teachers, when talking about the improvements experienced by their students, emphasize the healthy function exerted by martial arts on every person.

During an interview with master Claudio (the elder in the school) he confessed that thanks to practicing martial arts his body is very healthy, and that during many years of teaching this art, he happened to witness various improvements also among his students. Consequently, such a realization became for him a further reason for teaching martial arts, as he can provide his students not only with self-defense techniques, but also, and maybe more importantly, with a method of health-cultivation. In fact, he says:

Students have improved significantly their health conditions, and this gave me new stimuli to think about the potential healthy effects of the practice beyond the teachings of bodily techniques, to help them developing a condition of wellbeing.

Particularly relevant at this regard is the basic assumption of Giacomo the instructor, who, in accordance with this view, emphasizes the potential effects of the practice on health, as he personally experienced it along his training path and still continues to see

among practitioners. He remembers that grandmaster Chang repeatedly let his students notice that, beyond its martial function, practicing martial arts exert first of all beneficial effects on health, developing self-perception of one's own body and cultivating the internal energy. That's why grandmaster Chang used to say: "Kung Fu is 70% healthiness and 30% martial", as he tended to assign priority to the developments of bodily perceptions rather than the acquisition of martial techniques.

Second, *members that have practiced for longer time frequently reported improvements in the relationships with other people and in the way they undertake various tasks of the everyday life.* Such improvement is generally referred to a mental condition of more calm and serenity, more patience, and development of self-confidence and self-reflexive thought. Moreover, the structure of lessons and the concentration required for the application of certain movements, allow practitioners to find a better fluidity also in the interrelationships they establish with other people.

Master Claudio explains that during more than 20 years of practice, although having encountered dangerous situations in the everyday life, he has never had to apply martial techniques for self-defense from an aggression. Actually, he believes that learning traditional martial arts lead practitioners, especially if done under the supervision of serious and diligent teachers, toward developing an attitude of passivity or non-action (a cardinal idea expressed by the Taoist philosophical concept of 無為) when confronted, and in some cases, overwhelmed, by other's aggressive behaviors. He notices that the philosophical principle of non-action extends beyond the mechanism of attack and defense learned in martial arts, as along time it can be interiorized in a mental response of softness and un-receptivity when facing any kind of challenges. Similarly, instructor Giacomo talks of patience and self-control acquired along many years of practice, a condition that is clearly perceived by people he interacts with. He refers to self-control specifically for what regarding emotional reactions toward others, which is reflected also by a general state of serenity, calm, and deeper self-awareness. Moreover, as he puts it, an important aspect of the practice is given by the cathartic function of a lesson, after which he usually feels refreshed and released.

Referring to practitioners, a characteristic element of interrelationships directly connected with the practice, is represented by the observance and respect for each person's position within the group. Here, it is exemplificative Elisa's declaration:

Practicing Kung Fu and the system of relationships established during the lessons, according to different hierarchic levels between members, let me interiorize an attitude of humility toward my superiors and one of tolerance toward my subalterns.

It seems that the environment created within the group is very likely to lead practitioners to developing a more introspective attitude, accompanied both by a greater awareness of one's activity and by respect toward others. For example Francesco emphasizes the aspect of respect and humility in the observance of the discipline's teachings when he says:

It's like little by little I've developed myself more wisdom, I think a lot more, I act knowing what I do, thinking again about it many times...

Then he continues connecting the discourse to interpersonal relations:

...regarding humility I try to be benevolent with everyone around me, maybe it has to do with education, in fact education is very important because in a sportive environment there is not education, at least here in the West...but if you come here you know who is the master, you have to bow, in short there are a series of events that can change you.

Filippo, another practitioner who has learned for around six years refers to significant changes in these terms:

Martial arts taught me the value of silence, of calmness, it helped me to handle a conflict, accepting an obstacle and solving a problem with a different mental attitude...it gave me a better interpretation of life.

Some members talk of a generalized satisfaction in facing others, having the possibility of expressing one's own ideas without fearing other people's reactions. This reflects in part an increased self-esteem as along time, the practitioner sees himself or herself more

and more able to performing a certain movement, accompanied at the same time by a significant improvement in physical conditions like I previously showed. It is very likely that such self-esteem for practitioners might contribute to build, especially in those who have learned for longer time, a major grade of self-confidence, which allow them to better interact with other people.

Finally, it is important to underline how *some practitioners further deepen their self-reflexive thought or self-analysis, moving from a better awareness of the body toward a spiritual self-realization*. This element represents the last level of the continuum that I attempted to trace through the analysis of experiential contents among martial artists, and it will be discussed in the last section.

## **Religious Life and Spiritual Dimension**

As showed in the previous section, spiritual self-cultivation can be found in some cases as a direct consequence of a personal training path, that initially starts with an overall improvement of one's own state of wellbeing, leading in a second time toward higher levels in search of self-realization and spiritual cultivation.

With the specific intent of analyzing deeper dimensions associated with the embracement of a discipline such as martial art, whether they can be related to certain symbolic values inspired by a complete involvement in a system of traditional meanings, I first inquired practitioners beliefs for what regarded as religious life.

In general we can observe *various ideas regarding religious beliefs although most of them are rooted in the Catholic tradition*. Indeed, most of practitioners define themselves Catholics believers, or at least close to the Catholic tradition in which they've been growing up, even though they are not Church goers, interpreting this religion in their own ways.

As supposed before starting my fieldwork experience, interviews reveal a certain grade of *knowledge of Buddhist and Taoist principles in those members that have practiced for longer time, included teachers, supporting the idea that such element is strictly connected with the practice of martial arts*. Referring to these persons, we can find not only a discrete knowledge of Buddhist and Taoist principles, but they also try to apply such

principles in any situations of the everyday life, becoming referential doctrines that acquire spiritual and existential meaning. Such knowledge can derive either from a personal research of material such as books and websites, or from a direct exchange of information between members and teachers. For example both master Claudio and instructor Giacomo emphasize the fundamental connection between martial arts and Taoist teachings, suggesting that it is important to know these principles in order to better understand the origin of the styles practiced. Apart from the teachers, even other practitioners, especially those who have learned for longer time, seem very attracted by Taoist principles (mostly inspired by the reading of the text *Dao De Jing* 道德經) as they are considered meaningful referential points in one's life. At this regard we can observe an increasing interest for Taoism in descriptions such as the ones expressed by Guido and Filippo (both have entered the group around six years ago) who respectively refer to the Taoist text with affirmation like these:

*Dao De Jing* is very stimulating, it reflects much of what I think and allow a free interpretation.

I think there is a basic order in life and I think this order is the Tao, from a philosophical point of view it seems quite meaningful.

According to the teachers though, this tendency is more remarked in the course of *Tai Ji* rather than the one of *Shaolin*. In fact master Claudio, who teaches both *Tai Ji Quan* and *Shaolin Quan*, notices that *Tai Ji* practitioners, on one side because of a more mature age, and, on the other side, because of the very nature of this style, are more likely to approach philosophical-religious aspects of the discipline. Moreover, he suggests *Tai Ji* group be a more appropriate terrain for introducing certain philosophical values, in which practitioners' spiritual needs can be canalized.

Finally, it is interesting to notice that even though some practitioners actively embraced Buddhist and Taoist philosophical-religious principles, *these are not in conflict with previous religious beliefs, actually, as emerged from some interviews, it constitutes a further development of spiritual self-realization that can be applied in any kind of life's situation*. Such is the condition that characterizes those practitioners who basically consider themselves Catholics believers, and who find in Eastern philosophical-religious

principles a completion of previous religious beliefs, which provide them with paths of canalization for their spiritual needs. For example, Francesco, who defines himself a Catholic believer, thinks that his religious beliefs do not preclude the embracement of other religious principles, on the opposite, he can harmoniously combine them. He expresses such idea in this passage:

These are two parallel paths, so you can follow both of them, actually in my opinion they help you realize yourself even more completely.

To conclude, religious beliefs are commonly rooted in the Catholic tradition and basically group's members have been growing up in this tradition, absorbing its ideas and postulates about life. It seems, though, that at one point of the practice, spiritual needs and the context offered by the discipline encounter each other, becoming for someone a receptacle of spiritual cultivation and self-realization. Maybe it is here that the discipline of martial arts reaches its highest level, where working with the body represents a point of departure toward higher spiritual levels, and where transcendence of ordinary existential conditions is made possible.

At this regard, we can notice the sacred character of martial arts (in part already expressed by individuals' preference toward this discipline over previously practiced sports), a characteristic expressed by the embracement and the re-actualization of certain philosophical and religious traditional beliefs. According to the work of Hervieu-Léger, who refers to religiosity as a subjective attitude toward the sacred, transcendent, and spiritual, in front of a loss of life's meaning, it seems that practicing martial arts, for the very fact that it implies a particular belief and a reference to the authority of a tradition, represents, in some parts, the expression of a religiosity through the construction of "chains of memory". In other words, as the embracement of the discipline establishes a continuation with past traditions (chains of memory), which also represents chains of belief, we assist here to the subjective reconstruction of meaning, in terms of self-reconstruction of life's meaning. In this sense, then, the repetitiveness of the practice, which effects practitioners' bodily perceptions, ideas, and values, becomes a path of canalization for the expression of individuals' spiritual needs, acquiring those sacred and religious traits that cannot be found anymore in modern religious institutions.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have examined various aspects of martial arts, focusing on values and representations experienced on a personal level by a group of practitioners from a school located in central Italy. As we have seen, these aspects reflect respectively practitioner's motivations, interpersonal dynamics in the group, space created during the practice, most significant changes on a personal level related to the practice, and spiritual dimension.

I showed that interpersonal relations established within the group, creates a special space in which, despite the hierarchical order between practitioners and teachers, it discloses the potential of generating new changes and meanings. Moreover, the ritualistic aspect of the lessons, characterized by crossing of the school's area, bowing in front of the lineage ancestors, and the performance of forms, determines a condition of *liminality*, wherein members experience a passage of status, a conditions out of the everyday social structure.

In addition, data gathered through my fieldwork participant observation showed that the practice of martial arts can acquire an important position in a martial artist's life, providing practitioners with new coordinates for perceiving one's own body and their interactions with others. Life's stories here examined represent an idea of martial arts very similar to the one of an educational path particularly characterized by a deep involvement on different existential levels, making it a kind of experience that cannot be reduced to the mere bodily techniques domain. In fact, as supported by the idea of "chain of memories", we observed that for the very characteristics intrinsic to the discipline, group's members establish a continuation with the traditions, finding in the embracement of a bodily discipline a path of canalization and expression for their spiritual needs.

In sum, this ethnography revealed how martial arts carry on the potential of being integrated in a life's style along a continuum that goes from a better awareness of the body to a spiritual self-cultivation. This suggest us to consider this discipline as an educational path articulated through different stages, in which the embodiment of its patterns, lead practitioners along time toward their self-realization, in terms of self-reconstruction of life's meaning. Although I attempted at covering various domains of the practice, my fieldwork research has been carried out for a relatively short period. For this reason, further studies will be needed in order to deepen certain issues, and they should

be articulated in two main directions: on one side, inquiring, through narrative analysis, practitioners stories and experiences covering a larger sample of people among various groups, on the other side, undertaking a comparative study between martial arts schools located in different places, in particular way, accosting data gathered in Italy with a new fieldwork research in Taiwan or Mainland China.

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