

50 YEARS IN MY JOURNEY OF THE PATH

Interview of Gabriele Manu to Sifu Alessandro Cossu

February 23, 2016, it is an important date, that coincides with your 50th year of practice in traditional Kung Fu. Active practice, so uninterrupted and constant. What are your thoughts about that? Did you ever consider, at that time, you'd reach this goal?

When I was a child, I imagined I would have been a doctor or I would have worked in the world of film set (and this I really did for a period of my life); on the contrary, at that time, I would have never thought of being a martial arts teacher. However, as time passed by and with years of practice, Kung Fu became my Path and my reason of life. I understood I wouldn't and couldn't do anything else. Even if I approached to other martial arts yet in 1963, I consider my real beginning of practice on February 23, 2016, which is the day I started studying Kung Fu. Some years later, I even found a notebook where I wrote the exact time – 6:45 pm – of my first class... Since then I never stopped learning, even after I began teaching.

During my first period of practice, my childhood and youth have been deeply influenced by Kung Fu. I found myself doing moves and techniques of this incredible art during games with my playmates, in dangerous situations or in common and daily matters. My teacher kept repeating me in an almost obsessive way never to use martial arts to hurt anybody and even told me to keep it secret from my parents and other people.

Let's go back to the past for a moment, would you tell us how did you start practicing?

A friend of mine was hurt and I went with him to see a Chinese masseur called Tang Yun Kuo, who practiced acupuncture in a singular pose (that afterwards I discovered was the *Ma-Bu*, the knight). He asked my friend how he hurt his ankle. When Tonio answered it was due to a round kick, Tang asked what kind of martial art was he practicing and then showed how in his family style kicks were blocked with legs and not with arms, aside from rare instances. I was soon positively impressed by that man who did massages. I felt immediately, I do not know how to fully explain this, that he would have been my Sifu.

Why did you choose Kung Fu and what impressed you mostly?

I did not choose Kung Fu, I have been chosen by Kung Fu. If you are small, defenseless, fearful and scary you choose this art. The Tiger has no fear, when it is scared, his nature and his temper come out. After a brief period of practice in Karate, my uncle gave me a small Kung Fu book, I noticed it was not limited to the use of only one technique; apart from being different from other martial arts and from having his own characteristics and traits, among the other features, there was also religion. You didn't use only muscle power, but even what I, as a child, used to call 'magic power' and that today I define as inner power. I understood it could be useful, I was looking for something that could help me. I slowly realized how complete it was: training, eating, breathing, meditation, philosophy, animals and weapons. However, what I appreciated most from the beginning was the religiosity and the fact it taught you to think in a certain way: in this art everything is linked, nothing is at random. Obviously it is a long and difficult way.

In Kung Fu there are various arts (calligraphy, the mastering of Chi, breathing, the harmonious study of animals and traditional weapons) so that it favors the aspect of art first and then the martial one. I need it to help people and it taught me, for example, not to care for money. A passionate lesson, with a good training student, pays the lesson itself. The base of all this is still a religious matter: Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism teach you the Path to reach Kung Fu.

Who was your first Sifu and what style did you practice at the beginning?

Master Tang practiced a family style, the NanXi Chuan Kung Fu (also called Na-Zhi or Nai Zi) so "The Fist and the Essence of transmitting in South", since the age of five, under the careful eye of his martial uncle, Mr Feng Lu Cheng, and after with other important Masters in different locations

in China. I trained under his guide for almost six and a half years. I practiced in every place I could and in every free moment: that is why I was able to become his Disciple. In a room of his house he put up a kwoon (or fangjian kwoon). There you studied stances and Forms, while for the teaching of Animals and traditional weapons, he took out the curtain that divided the training room from the rest of the flat; furthermore, sometimes he let me go with him in his work as a masseur. This way, day after day, I gained his gratitude and respect, as student first, then as Disciple in his School.

How was Kung Fu 50 years ago?

After the first meeting - accidental but fascinating – with Master Tang, I decided to follow my curiosity. There was something luring me back to him, even though I only had seen him as an expert in massaging and not yet as a great expert of Chinese martial arts. After that for several months I knocked in vain to his door; when he finally accepted me into his house, with some of my comrades, I was surprised and amazed by the amount of peculiar items in that place, there were family photos, walking canes, straight swords, sabers made of wood or iron. Then miniatures, a small altar with his uncle's photo placed in the center, direct descendant of the grandmaster of his Family style, and many drapes with mysterious easterly writings, colored and faded.

Tang was not so good at speaking Italian, so we talked mostly with gestures in his massage sessions. However I soon realized his moves and behaviors were aimed to choose one who could have followed his Path. After some time, the training became evident with definite exercises, which included also practice in balancing, with odd names, like the 'Imperial Guard' stance, in which you walked like soldiers, or techniques like the 'punch with the candle'; suspension stances on a single leg with containers full of water like, for instance, the 'Blocking Crane', in which, hitting them with a stick, he made his students quickly lift the front leg; workouts with crossed ropes on the ground, to correct the basic stances of the style. Moreover, during practice me and my comrades had to train separately: we couldn't see each other, we could only hear each other at some distance. This was a direct instruction of Master Tang, to make everyone acquire and penetrate *Chi* (or Qi, it can be translated as Life Breath) in his body and mind. I had barely the time to assimilate his system, when Tang called me, my friend Giuliano and the other boy which practiced with us, and made us a strange talk I did not understand at the time. Shortly after Tang left to come back in China, leaving me some stuff and giving me the permission to follow his path, only if I wanted and was able to go on with his teaching.

[Is there any anecdote from your first years of practice that you remember particularly?](#)

I recall numerous episodes regarding that time, some of which rather singular and even amusing. One day I was training at my Master's house. There was an honey jar and he, with the usual manner, made a gesture, as he was offering it to us. Indeed this was one of the little expedients to test us. Unlike the others, I didn't rush to the honey jar for a simple reason: that day I had already eaten. However, he really appreciated my indifference and was pleasantly impressed. I remember this anecdote because it was the only time as a Student that I was able to gain points in the eyes of the Master.

I remember fondly another episode. The Master had been observing me, and he had noticed that I often carried with me some marbles and colored balls, which I used to put into my backpack before each training. Those kind of toys were very popular among children of my age at the time; it was a simple hobby, but I was fond of it. So, Tang (the Master, ndr) began asking me to pledge them: I had to pay one marble for each Form he taught me. In the beginning it hurt me (In the beginning I wasn't sure), but I agreed. Needless to say, in the end he gave all of them back. It was yet another small great test which he wanted to put me through to understand how much I wanted to practice Kung Fu.

The Master gave his permission to practice the Style only if and when he felt the students were physically and mentally ready: we had to convince him that he had every reason to think so. He couldn't burn his Chi in vain, wasting time teaching to people who weren't really convinced and motivated. The Master told us – I will never forget this – that we should aspire to the lesson. As a matter of fact, only after many more years of practice I came to the following conclusion: one must create "a quiet meditative waiting".

[The Chinese word “Sifu” \(Master\) can be translated as "martial father": which meaning do you give to this word and what does being a Master imply?](#)

Sifu – or Shifu, as they taught me – means Master or Father to the traditional school; this implies that there should be a Si Tai Gung, or, simply put, a Great Master or a Grandfather. My school's Si Tai Gung is Master Gin Foon Mark. In a school without a Si Tai Gung the Sifu cannot exist, but only a Jishi, which means “boss father”. For me, being a Sifu means to teach responsibly what is still being taught to me, and then hand down the truth to my students.

[At some point of your Path you met your current Master, Gin Foon Mark, who is the world leader of the Kwong Sai Jook Lum style for this lineage. Could you tell us how you met this Great Master and how it is to practice under his guidance?](#)

It was on account of one my students at that time, Christian Cappelluti - an extraordinary young man who unfortunately left us too soon. One day he told me: "You need one more Master and the ultimate teaching. You are wasted here". It was 1997 and this is how I met my current Master, Gin Foon Mark. At that time I was a little reluctant to study under another teacher and Christian himself, with yet another intuition, persuaded me and involved me into this project. He made it his goal, and after a lot of research he suggested me the name of Gin Foon Mark, one of the greatest masters in the world, who has been living in the U.S. When I began looking into him, I was literally astonished. Incredibly, I thought back of my time with Master Tang, when he revealed to me that there was maybe only one Master in the world who could unveil the secrets of the southern styles; as years go by, I am increasingly convinced that this Master was Gin Foon Mark indeed...

[What do you want to convey to your students?](#)

I've had the chance to practice under several different Masters of the most various Kung Fu Styles and, comparing them to my Master's System, I appreciated the high-level training they gave me. With years of practice, I have summarized the most effective technical aspects of the various systems; and, after a few years, I finally came to understand what being a Sifu means: to help my students into the Path, to continue my own training with devotion, to always grow my thirst for

learning and growth.

My purpose is to convey a good Kung Fu, as Master Mark still teaches me today. My first Sifu often told me: "I don't believe I am a great Sifu, I am rather a real example and a guide who will help in this path every student eager to continue Kung Fu". In the end, then, he reminded me to "retire when the work is done". As it was explained to me, he that "closes his hands" can only be a Master who has already identified his successor and has delegated to him the teaching of his Kung Fu Style. As a matter of fact, I should say "successors", since in the traditional Family and School of this Master there should have been two successors: one symbolically represented the right arm of the Sifu, the other one his left arm.

With two of my students, Riccardo Russo and Umberto Albano (the latter is today Head Instructor of my school), we continued to research online. What struck me were Gin Foon Mark's photos and curriculum. Riccardo had to go to the U.S. to learn to speak English, so he chose to go to Minneapolis (*where Gin Foon Mark lives -Ed*). A few days after his arrival, he called us: he enthusiastically told us how amazed he was by Master Mark, in his seventies at that time, and that he started to train under his guidance. Riccardo told him about me and Master Mark replied that, before accepting me as a student, he wanted to meet me in person. With some linguistic difficulties, I managed to talk on the phone with Gin Foon Mark for the first time: he wanted me to come directly to his Kwoon in Minneapolis. Since then, it's been almost twenty years; I've never ceased training under his guidance: every year I spend about a month in the U.S. training in his kwoon. Master Mark, a true traditional Master, gave me the honor of being accepted as a student, and even just being by his side allows me to continue to learn.