

# SHAOLIN WUSHU



A Chinese emperor in AD 540 believed that by ordering Buddhist monks to spend their days hunched over desks, translating texts from Sanskrit to Chinese, he was on the path to Nirvana. An Indian Buddhist priest known as Tamo to the Chinese visited and told the emperor that enlightenment could not be achieved solely through the good works of others. The two disagreed, and Tamo left to spend time with the Shaolin monks.

During his time observing the monks, Tamo realized that they were not in very good physical condition and could not effectively accomplish even the most basic Buddhist meditation practices. To build their strength, Tamo taught them moving exercises he modified from various forms of Indian yoga. These moves eventually became part of a self-defense program for the monks, who lived in a very remote area. It became known as Shaolin *wushu* (martial arts), more commonly referred to as *kung fu*.

*Wushu* had existed in China for centuries before Tamo introduced his particular style, which teaches that legs and kicks are more powerful than the arms, which are used primarily for blocking and feinting. Shaolin style is based on four cornerstones: Wude (martial morality), Consistency, Health and Growth. Shaolin students must commit to practicing, strive to be physically and mentally healthy and understand that experience eventually leads to wisdom which always results in growth.

The notion of Buddhist monks and martial arts seems incongruous, since Buddhism supports non-violence. However, one who practices Shaolin *wushu* is never the attacker. The goal is that the practitioner gains a better understanding of violence and how to avoid conflict. If one receives a threat of violence or attack, the Buddhist *wushu* expert justifies returning the attack by simply refusing “acceptance” of intended harm to himself.

