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Why I . . . practise kung fu

Professor of biological psychiatry Carmine Pariante talks to **Helen Jones** about how kung fu helps his physical and mental health and has taught him about the fragility of life

Helen Jones

“I was part of a generation of kids that grew up with Bruce Lee movies,” says Carmine Pariante, a consultant perinatal psychiatrist at the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. “He was instrumental in bringing kung fu culture to the wider world.”

Pariante first began taking kung fu classes 15 years ago. “I immediately had a good feeling about it. I enjoyed the physical activity, the time with the other students, and the underpinning philosophy,” he says.

For the first 10 years Pariante would go to a class once a week, but he now attends three times a week. “The more I trained the more it became an essential part of my life,” he says.

“It helps my mental and physical health. If I can’t train—because I go on holiday or I’m travelling for work—then I start getting back pain, I get more nervous, and my mind becomes clouded. Kung fu sharpens my body and my mind.”

Kung fu also has a strong social element, Pariante says. “It’s traditionally taught in a club with a chief instructor guiding other instructors and students—it’s like a family structure.”

He adds, “Moreover, you build up a relationship with the other students. We’re not a team like in football, but your fellow students help you train and push you to develop. Over the years I’ve seen people grow up, get married, and have children of their own.”

There are many different styles of kung fu, and Pariante practises Fujian White Crane Kung Fu, which is based on the movement of the white crane and is about balance and elegance.

“Legend has it that this style was created by a woman. It is about agility and speed, rather than strength,” he says.

The club that Pariante attends does not use a ranking system or belts like some other martial arts. “There isn’t a badge system because there isn’t a culture of competition in kung fu,” he says.

“It’s much more about continuing personal development. You learn and improve every day and over the course of your life. So, rather than comparing yourself with another student, it’s all about the underpinning philosophy and the personal journey.”

Pariante acknowledges that some people associate martial arts with violence. “Sometimes, when I say I practise kung fu, people say, ‘I mustn’t make you angry,’” Pariante says.

Classical kung fu, he explains, is as much about healing and rehabilitation as it is about fighting.

Traditionally, Chinese kung fu masters would also be experts in disciplines such as herbal medicine and bone setting, he says.

“I do have the skills to fight. The martial element is important. It grounds me,” he says. “I know that certain movements could be lethal, but that reminds me how fragile we are and it makes me respect life much more.”

How to start

- Think about your own motivation and expectations—there are different styles of kung fu and you need to find the right one for you
- Although YouTube is full of online tutorials, it’s best to attend a class in person (there are live online classes available while covid-19 is still around). Kung fu has an important social element and is about learning from your instructors and fellow students
- Most clubs or classes are happy to offer a taster session to prospective students
- Be patient—it takes time to learn