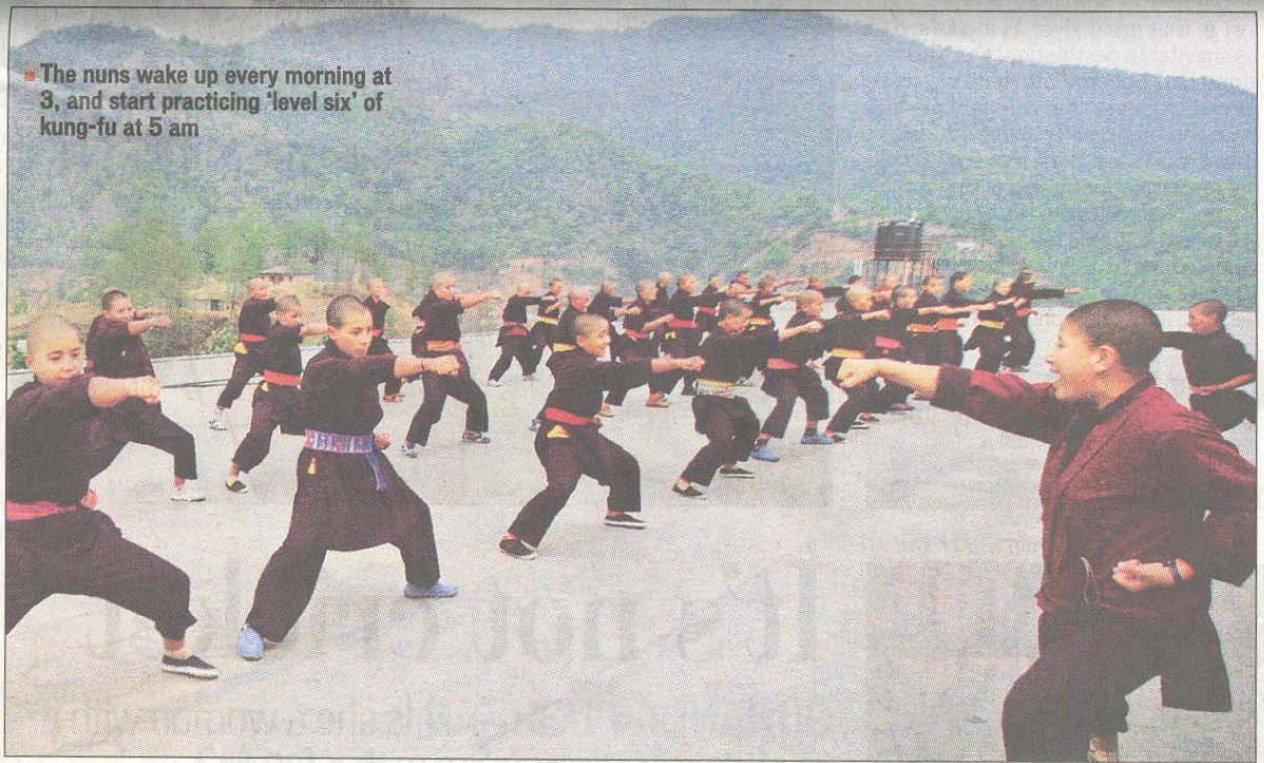


■ The nuns wake up every morning at 3, and start practicing 'level six' of kung-fu at 5 am



The kung-fu nuns of Nepal

NUN AT THE TOP 200 nuns at a hilltop monastery in Kathmandu give a new twist to holistic well-being. And their regimen is the result of a happy accident.

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KATHMANDU: Every morning at 3 am, 17-year-old Lama Rupa wakes up for prayers at her nunnery in Kathmandu. Despite only five hours of sleep, she's full of energy and what she really looks forward to is a session of kung-fu two hours later. This, she believes, is what makes her agile, focused and much more confident than what she was at 15.

Like Rupa, 200 nuns from the Druk Gawa Khilwa Nunnery practise this ancient Chinese martial art every morning (and sometimes in the evening) atop the Druk Amitabha mountain in the capital of Nepal. At level six of the basic 16 in kung-fu, these nuns not only know how

to protect themselves from the big bad world but are also perfectly capable of sitting straight-backed for six hours at a stretch for meditation.

"I used to slouch a lot before I learnt kung-fu but now I sit straight like a stick at any given time," says 17-year-old Lama Zesaid, who is originally from Himachal Pradesh. "It's taught us to channel our energy and be positive about every thing we attempt in our daily lives."

FOO FIGHTERS

It was by pure coincidence that kung-fu became such an integral part of the Khilwa nunnery. On a visit to a nunnery in Vietnam, His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa, the spiritual head of the Drukpa lineage, watched some of the nuns prac-

tice kung-fu one evening. He was told that it helped the nuns concentrate better and made them self-reliant as well.

He also remembered how some of the nuns at the Khilwa nunnery were always fearful of travelling down the mountain because people would sometimes throw stones at them and even tease them. "We had cases of drivers troubling the nuns and were afraid that they might get kidnapped, or harmed," says Lin Chiang who's in charge of public communication. "So when His Holiness realised that kung-fu may even be learnt as a self-defense art, he asked some of the Vietnamese nuns to come and teach nuns in Kathmandu."

MIND, BODY AND SOUL

Dressed in their dark brown outfits, the kung-fu nuns are a welcoming sight for visitors. Their coordinated movements and swift response time are a joy to watch. And at Khilwa, only the nuns under 25 years are taught this martial art. This, their teacher Lama Chantwona says is because they are flexible to learn something as strenuous as kung-fu. "The only problem we've faced so far is the language. Otherwise everyone is very keen to learn this art and have been practicing regularly for the last two years."

With only a month to go for the nuns to learn the other 10 basic levels, His Holiness says he can see a drastic difference in them. "kung-fu has made my nuns feel happier and healthier in mind and in spirit," he says.



■ Mental well-being goes hand-in-hand with physical health at the Khilwa nunnery