

## PSYCHOLOGY

SERGIO RAIMONDO<sup>1,2(ADEF)</sup>, MARIA TERESA STAMPI<sup>2,3(ABCDEF)</sup>, MATTEO GIACOMETTI<sup>2,3(ADF)</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Cassino and South Lazio (Italy)

<sup>2</sup> Discipline Orientali Unione Italiana Sport per Tutti (Italy)

<sup>3</sup> Wat Muay Thai (Italy)

e-mail: sergio.raimondo@unicas.it; mariateresa.stampi@gmail.com; matteoxgiacometti@yahoo.it

### **Muay Thai, structuring the experience of oneself and the others in the martial arts: a pilot study**

Submission: 15.11.2018; acceptance: 10.01.2019

**Key words:** discipline, values, ram muay, growth, master, responsibility

#### **Abstract**

Background, problem and aim. The research attempts to verify the pervasiveness and intensity of the transformation that the experience of Muay Thai plays in the lives of Italian trainees. The study investigates what values are transmitted, what arises from self-awareness and from the relationship with the other, and which meanings are allocated to the fundamental concepts of sorrow/pain, limits and anger.

Methods. The questionnaire, composed of 18 open ended questions, was administered in five different Italian cities to 16 subjects (13 males, 3 females), aged between 15 and 42. In the people questioned, the range of experience practising the discipline varies from 3 months to 15 years. Answers have been qualitatively analysed based on a personal interpretation created by collating both shared and contrasting elements in the sample.

Results. The initial approach to the discipline is based on curiosity, whereas its continuation is encouraged by its anthropological and spiritual features, together with the level of preparation of the Master. The athlete's physical growth is identified as a predominant aspect of the discipline with which values such as respect and self-esteem are usually associated. This element yields attention to relationships with people and a braver attitude in overcoming difficulties on a daily basis. Pain and limits are perceived as an incentive to overcome oneself without abusing the opponent, whereas hate and anger are perceived as a stop to the expression of one's own capabilities. The change arising from the practice of the discipline is unanimously considered pervasive compared to daily life. Conclusion. Muay Thai discipline enriches a person's physicality and offers self-growth which substantially modifies the trainee's life in all its many characteristics and experiences.

#### **Introduction**

Muay Thai is an extremely complex Thai martial art whose origin, starting from the fifteenth century, is rooted between myth and legend, sinking its roots along half a millennium of history. Next to learning the fighting technique, the discipline of the mind is developed through meditation. These two complementary and inseparable parts find a perfect combination in the ancient Wai Khru rituals (tribute to the master) and *Ram Muay* (fighting dance). With the practice of Muay Thai increase strength and courage, the ability to withstand pain, control fear and anger, while a deep respect for the opponent is born.

The research investigates the real values of the discipline absorbed in the Italian experience through the administration of questionnaires to expert practitioners. The idea-force that sustains it is the consideration of every

organism as a complex web of information supported by a mind spread throughout the body as “extended mind”. The ecological conception of the mind proposed by Gregory Bateson opens the way to the conception of the mind not as individual reality but as a process extended to the whole “person” system, between people and beyond them, as immanent mind in the larger man-plus system-environment. The mental characteristics of the “person” system as a mind-body unit are immanent in the system as a whole and not only in some part of it: the mind is immanent in the circuits entirely contained in the brain-plus-body system. Each organism moves in a self-correcting system that works, with creative character, for attempts and errors based on information conceived by the organism as transformations of differences, and a difference that produces a difference is a unit of information that Bateson defines an idea [1972]. The neurophenomenolog-

ical approach of Maturana and Varela describes mind and matter as process and structure, two complementary aspects of the phenomenon of life. A similar theory is found in modern physics with Einstein's theory of relativity in which the concept of matter-energy equivalence and the dual corpuscular and wave nature of matter are introduced. The idea emerges of an organism as a complex network of information and the mind spread throughout the body as an "extended mind". To this unitary conception of mind-body the phenomenological idea is added that every person in their unity performs a signification operation towards himself and towards the world (system) in which he/she lives: "the world is not what I think, but what I live" [Merleau-Ponty 1945: 26], the truth is realized in the experience and at the same time it can only be lived through ourselves as a mind-body unit and the relationship with the world is given in this unity through the action. We are units in a continuous movement that is not in space or time, but rather inhabits them [Merleau-Ponty 1945: 195]. Our acting in the world, in relation to it, is intrinsically linked to our asking and asking, the action itself is both a question and a response to further questions to maintain homeostatic equilibrium and to manage the inevitable perturbations of the relationship between the mind system body and world system. On this basis, in our research we have moved to assume a mind-body unit for each Muay Thai practitioner to evaluate whether the discipline and the participant mutually influence each other in practice in order to define the degree of pervasiveness that this relationship achieves in the life of every practitioner. Pain, anger, fear are all experiences that every Muay Thai practitioner has to face, for each one they assume specific meanings, still following the perspective that every meaning is always given in the experience lived in the uniqueness and unity of each person. Closing the circle, this research starts from the questions but assumes that the experience of each practitioner begins with a questioning that has found the answer to the practice of Muay Thai, which in turn leads to further wondering. Living the discipline by giving it meaning inevitably leads to change it and at the same time to be modified, so that the change does not remain limited to the gym but affects every area of life as the practitioner lives in the world, lives the world, which changes with him. Everything is in constant motion and as Cipolletta [2002: 62] maintains: "The questions are our eternal companions of travel, they accompany us all life and the best answer that a question can have are its best questions".

### Methods. Researcher

If practising Muay Thai means experiencing change, the figure of the researcher is much more effective if he participates in the experience he investigates, thus becoming himself responsible for the object of inves-

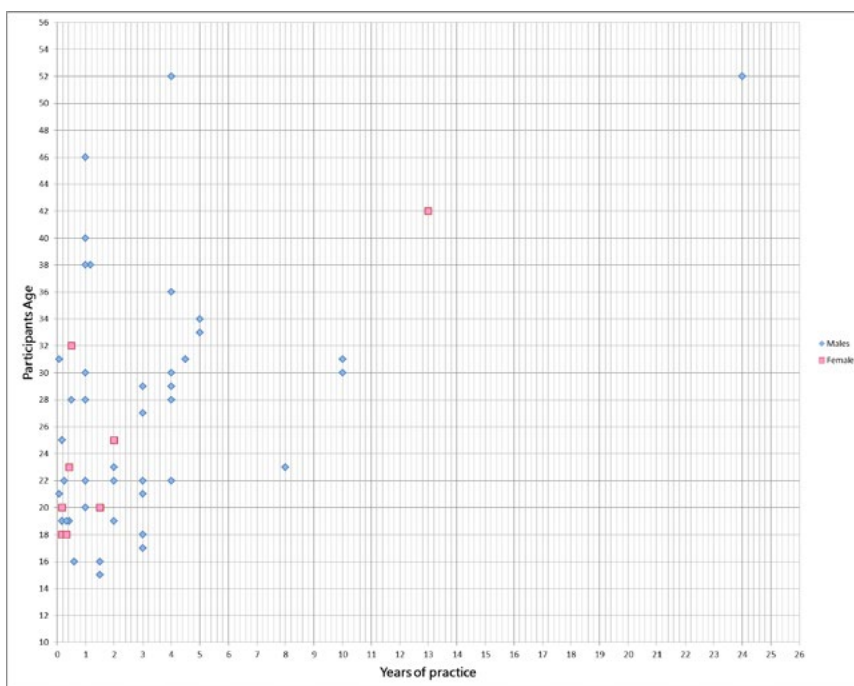
tigation [Armezzani 2002; Mead 1934]. In this regard, the experience gained over many years of practice has allowed the researcher to place himself in the privileged perspective of participating observer. The indissoluble unity "to be-act-knowing" of each participant is investigated in the personal change on all three levels: experiential for being, conversational for action and referential for knowing [Cipolletta 2004]. At the same time the researcher must valorise his role as an actor interacting with the environment and therefore as a creator of meanings that structure his perception of the world with the consequent interpretation in relation with the other participants. Watching is being watched, thanks to interviews and questionnaires a mutual interpretation is established between the people involved.

### Methods. Administration of questionnaires and data collection

A questionnaire was administered and divided into four basic categories: approach to the discipline; basic content; meanings attributed to it; its areas of influence / change in the lives of practitioners. The questionnaires were administered to the participants in three different ways in the following quantities: three questionnaires by e-mail; three questionnaires collected through a recorded interview; ten questionnaires administered in a paper form, under the supervision of the researcher. In each answer, key words and conceptual nuclei were identified that synthesized the content, sometimes shared in the answers of different participants to the same question. For each question the conceptual nuclei of each answer were collected and structured in a graph that corresponded to the diffusion width of each expressed concept.

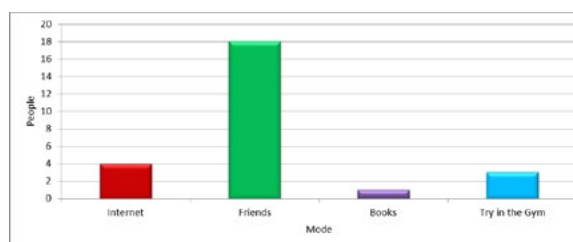
#### Questions

1. How long have you been practising Muay Thai?
2. How did you approach this discipline and what motivated you to continue its study?
3. Is regulation enough or does it also need to know the culture in which the discipline is born?
4. What is the difference between Muay Thai on a sporting level and Muay Boran? Do you need to know them both?
5. Is it necessary to know and practise Ram Muay and Wai Khru? Why? What importance do they have?
6. In what aspects can an athlete grow?
7. Is pain part of the discipline? How should it be addressed?
8. Anger: limit or resource? Is hate part of the matches?
9. Super man or overcoming one's fears?
10. When you fight what is at stake?
11. Who is the opponent?
12. What is your first enemy?
13. Where are the limits?
14. If you lose a meeting, who is responsible?



**Figure 1.** Practice of Muay Thai during the life  
Source: Own research.

- 15. Is the winner the one to thank? And what if he does not win?
- 16. Is it right for children to practise Muay Thai?
- 17. What values are transmitted in Muay Thai and how these values influence your daily life? Which aspects of your life is most influencing the practice of Muay Thai?
- 18. It is therefore possible to state that the size of the gym, training and training ring as spaces where you live the discipline are extensible to the rest of his life?



**Figure 2.** Approach the discipline.  
Source: Author’s own research.

**Results**

The number of participants is 50, 8 females (16%) and 42 males (84%). The age varies from 15 to 50 years, while the duration of the practice ranges from 1 month to 24 years.

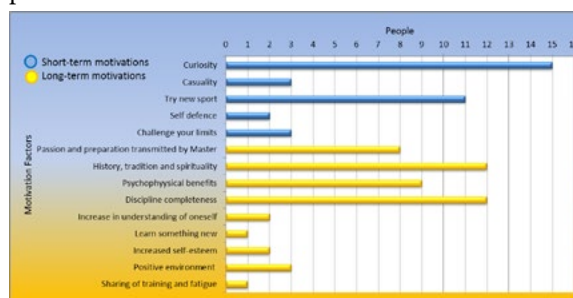
Q1: How long have you been practising Muay Thai?

Most of the participants are between 18 and 38 years of age. The years of practice however ranges from 1 month to 5 years, these data may mean that the spread of Muay Thai in Italy began to achieve substantial results five years ago. Finally it is important to underline the preponderance of male participants in our research.

Q2: How did you approach this discipline and what motivated you to continue its study?

The privileged channel through which the knowledge of this discipline spreads is the word of the mouth. The exposure to the general public through television, magazines, films is not yet quite incisive, you work on local networks through friendships and knowledge or at most through the curiosity born from surfing on the internet and social networks.

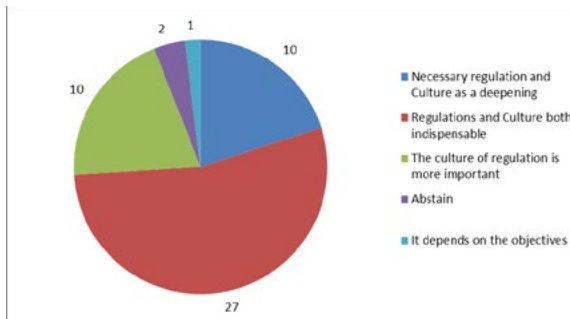
The motivations that have led our participants to continue the study of the discipline are different from each other, yet synthesizable in the common element of transmission of something profound that made them passionate. This common matrix declines in different shades as only human experience can elaborate. Finding a discipline that also takes care of the spiritual aspect and embellishes a historical and cultural richness, surely adds value to the psychophysical benefits of those who practice it.



**Figure 3.** Why Muay Thai is practised.  
Source: Author’s own research.

Q3: *Is regulation enough or does it also need to know the culture in which the discipline is born?*

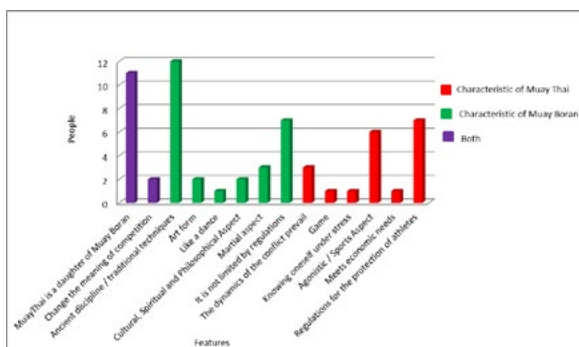
Knowing the culture in which the discipline is born and developed is seen not only as a gain in terms of personal knowledge, but as a frame of meaning in which to include the practice of Muay Thai. Without this framework the experience would lose substance, turning into a more superficial contact that does not support the person in understanding Muay Thai in its entirety, both as a martial discipline and as a real art. The knowledge of regulation is still essential, both for those who just want to keep in training, and for those who fight at a competitive level. The regulation is part of the language of the discipline and culture serves to reveal its meaning.



**Figure 4.** Regulations and Culture.  
Source: Author’s own research.

Q4: *What is the difference between Muay Thai on a sporting level and Muay Boran? Do you need to know them both?*

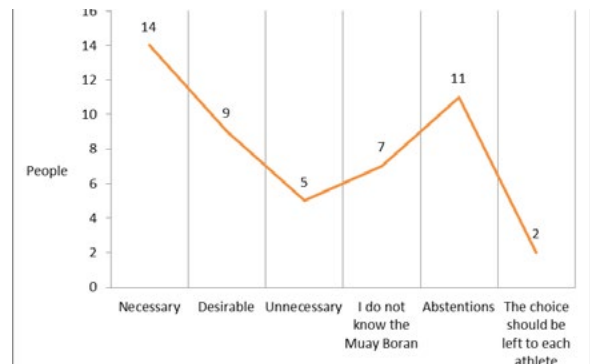
The most recognized difference between Muay Thai at the sporting level and Muay Boran is the derivation of the first from the second, with the prevalence of the traditional aspect in Muay Boran, while in Muay Thai sports prevails the competitive aspect with consequent presence of rules to be respected. On a sporting level, in fact, there is a regulation, in order to get as balanced as possible for the protection of athletes. The Muay Boran is born to be used in war and as a means of defence, in contexts without rules where you must face any variable.



**Figure 5.** Differences between Muay Thai and Muay Boran.  
Source: Own research.

Most of the interviewees consider it necessary or at least desirable to study both Muay Boran and Muay

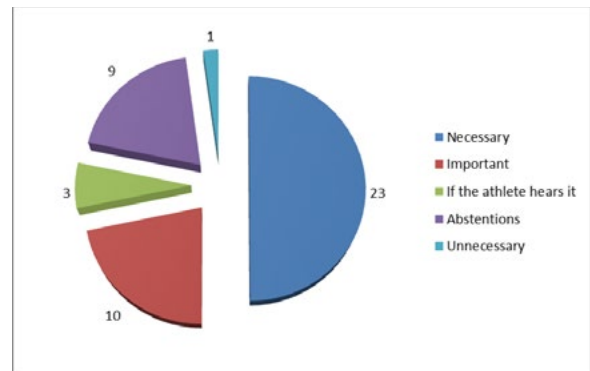
Thai on a sporting level to get a complete overview of the discipline, but there is a high number of participants who do not know Muay Boran or abstained who do not they felt able to make a judgement.



**Figure 6.** Get to know Muay Thai and Muay Boran.  
Source: Author’s own research.

Q5: *Is it necessary to know and practise Ram Muay and Wai Khru? Why? What importance do they have?*

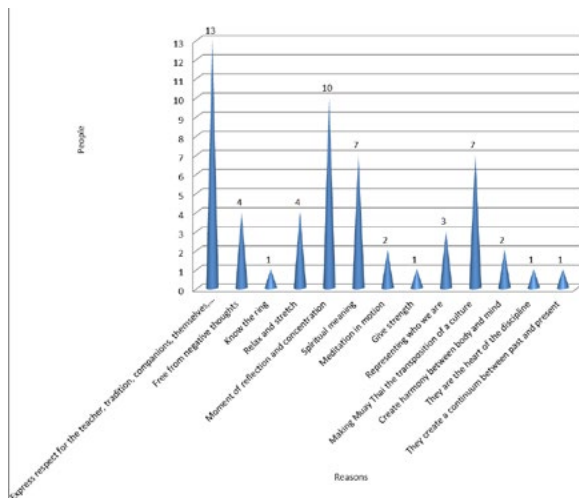
As in the Thai tradition, the interviewed participants also feel as necessary or however important the practice of Ram Muay and Wai Khru in conjunction with Muay Thai.



**Figure 7.** Get to know Ram Muay and Wai Khru.  
Source: Author’s own research.

The ritual (*Wai Khru*) and the fighting dance (*Ram Muay*) are the transposition of the culture in the martial art and serve above all to express respect towards the teacher and the tradition, as well as thanks to all those who allowed the athlete to be there at that moment, which accompanied him on the road to personal growth. The master representing all the masters who have studied and enriched this art handed down to us before him. Thanksgiving inexorably branches off to their companions, the family, themselves and even the opponent who is right in front of him, along with him. Besides the *Wai Khru* and *Ram Muay* are not only recognised physical benefits, such as muscle relaxation and stretching, but also emotional benefits such as serenity and inner strength that emerge concurrently with the concentration necessary for the execution of the movements, which root the athlete in

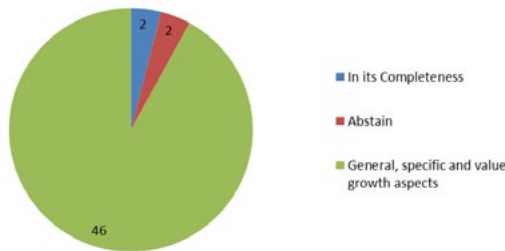
that fragment of time and space necessary to achieve lucidity, awareness and determination.



**Figure 8.** Why are Ram Muay and Wai Khru important?  
Source: Author’s own research.

Q6: *In what aspects can an athlete grow?*

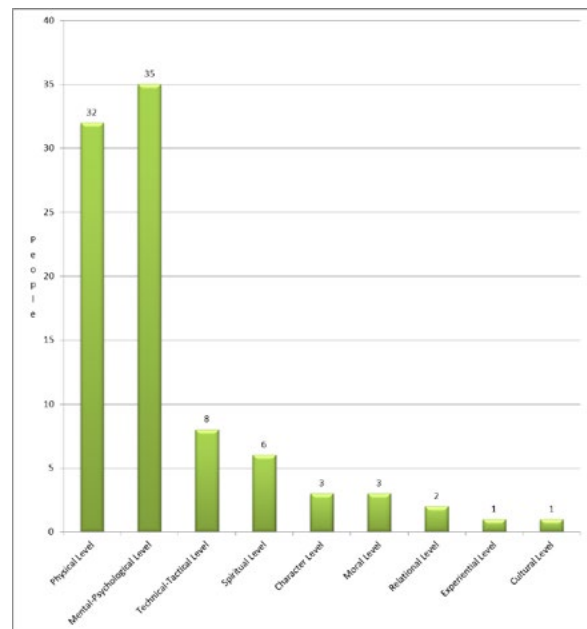
Most participants responded in a structured way, expressing different growth components, combining general and specific aspects with values.



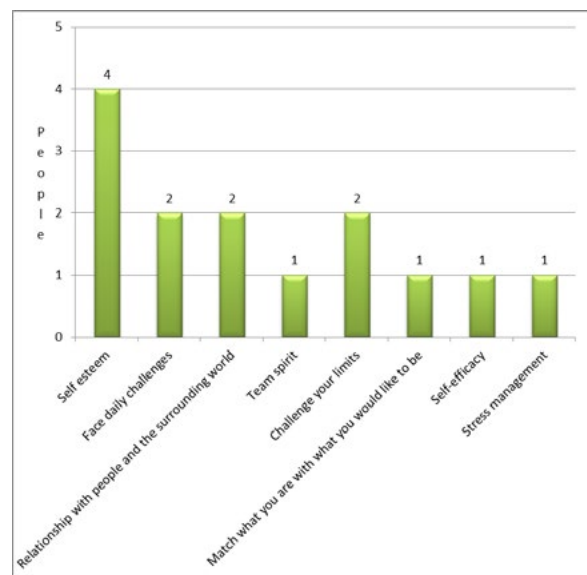
**Figure 9.** Athlete growth.  
Source: Author’s own research.

In the general aspects category, growth profiles were identified: on the physical level, balance, coordination, reflexes, external appearance, while at the mental-psychological level, awareness, trust, self-construction, self-confidence were underlined. Furthermore, growth profiles have been added on a technical-tactical, spiritual, psychological, moral, relational, experiential and cultural level.

The specific aspects are branched out in growth sprouts such as self-esteem, knowing how to face daily challenges, improving relationships with people and the world around us, challenging one’s own limits, self-efficacy, cultivating team spirit, since in the ring one is alone, but you train together as a family, make what you are matching with what you would like to be, managing stress.



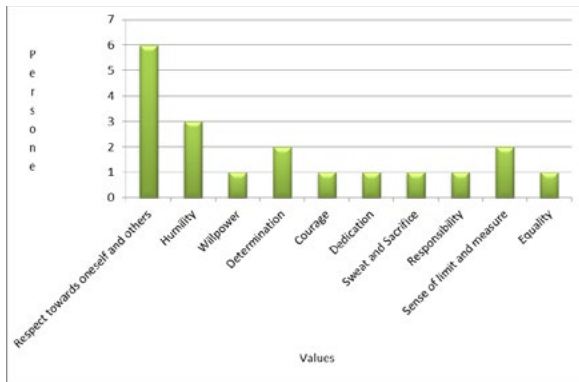
**Figure 10.** General aspects of growth.  
Source: Author’s own research.



**Figure 11.** Specific aspects of growth.  
Source: Author’s own research.

The values recognized as the growth domains of the discipline are: respect for oneself and others, humility, willpower, determination, courage, dedication, sweat and sacrifice, responsibility, sense of limit and measure, in particular avoiding the abuse of who is weaker or inexperienced, equality.

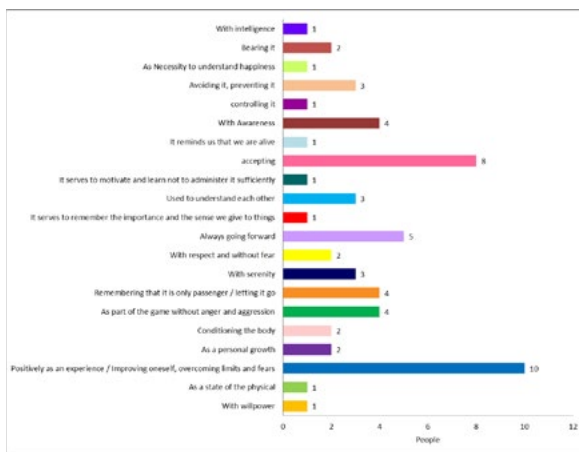
The words of the participants clearly express how in Muay Thai an athlete has the opportunity to grow in its entirety, as it is enriched in every facet of his being: physical, moral, spiritual, psychological, interpersonal relationships and develops a whole series of values, first of all respect, which help him in his personal journey.



**Figure 12.** Values aspects of growth.  
Source: Author’s own research.

Q7: *Is pain part of the discipline? How should it be addressed?*

Participants identify pain as an integral part of the discipline and some add as it is also an important component of life itself. It accompanies us in our experience and must be accepted, but this is not enough, we must face it as a possibility of change, exploiting it as a tool to understand and improve ourselves by overcoming limits and fears.



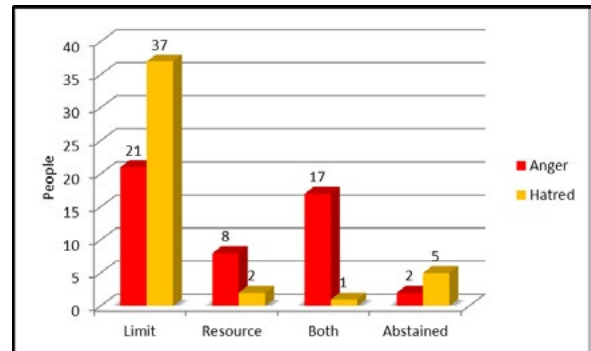
**Figure 13.** Pain: How to deal with this?  
Source: Author’s own research.

It is interesting that as many as five participants in their responses have performed a bipartition of pain: some between physical and psychological pain, others between one’s own pain and one’s adversary. Identifying a type of physical pain and a type of psychological pain, such as recognizing one’s own pain and that of one’s adversary, can be a way to qualify our experience, that is to see different nuances of a situation, obtaining a kaleidoscopic vision of reality. The awareness of greater complexity is accompanied by an increased ability to tackle problems, since we have more resources.

Q8: *Anger: limit or resource? Is hate part of the matches?*

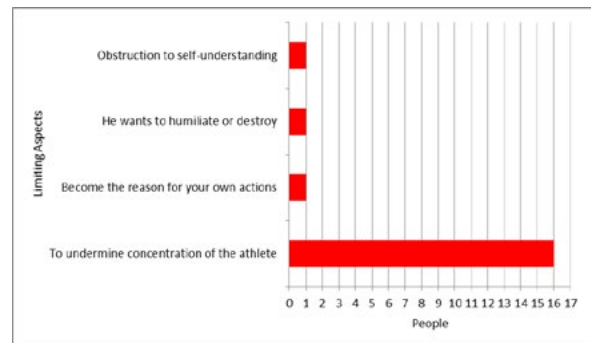
Anger, for almost half of the participants (21 people) is only a limit, but several others consider it a possible

resource (8 people) or potentially both (17 people). The hatred on the contrary is completely rejected by most of them (37 people), although it is recognized that unfortunately often happen to find athletes who carry hatred in the ring.



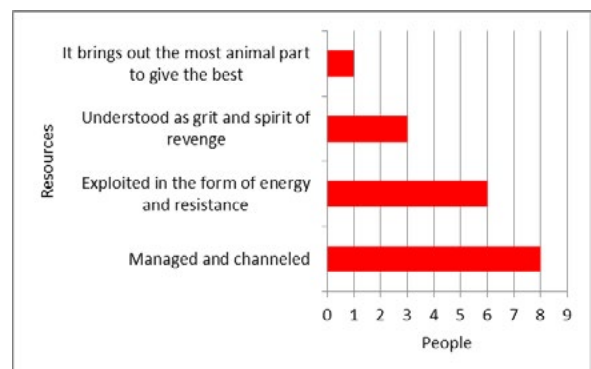
**Figure 14.** Anger and Hatred: Limits or Resources?  
Source: Author’s own research.

The anger for the participants becomes a limit if it becomes all-encompassing and causes the athlete to lose lucidity.



**Figure 15.** Anger as a limit if...  
Source: Author’s own research.

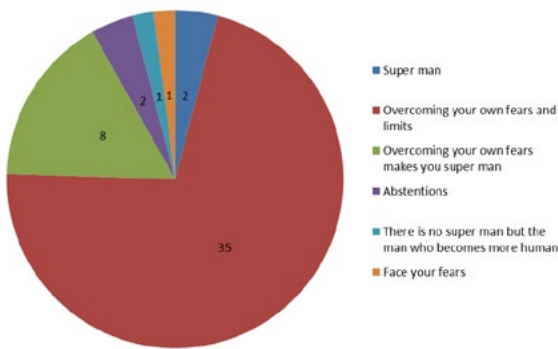
On the contrary, anger can be exploited as a resource according to the participants, in the case in which it is channelled in the correct way, to give the best of themselves by transforming themselves into energy and resistance.



**Figure 16.** Anger as a resource if...  
Source: Author’s own research.

**Q9: Super man or overcoming one's fears?**

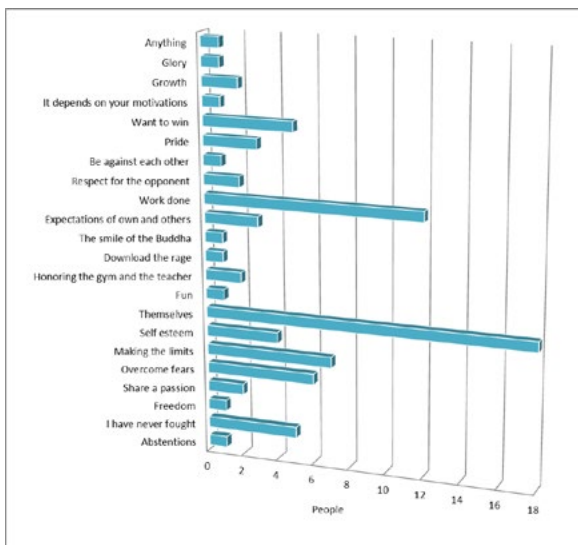
Faced with an apparent choice between the ideal of the super man in front of the overcoming of his fears almost all of the people opted for overcoming their fears, their limits. It is important to note, however, how for some we can become super men; in fact, in a very acute way one of the participants explains how super men can appear, not so much in their own eyes, as in the eyes of others, precisely because they have overcome their fears.



**Figure 17.** Super Man or Overcoming Fears?  
Source: Author's own research.

**Q10: When you fight what is at stake?**

When you fight you put yourself into play, in front of the opponent at that time you are alone, that becomes the perfect time to challenge your fears, your limits and evaluate all the work done until then. You fight with pride and desire to compete with your opponent, to win, have fun and grow, it seems that the common matrix of all these motivations is the passion towards what you do.

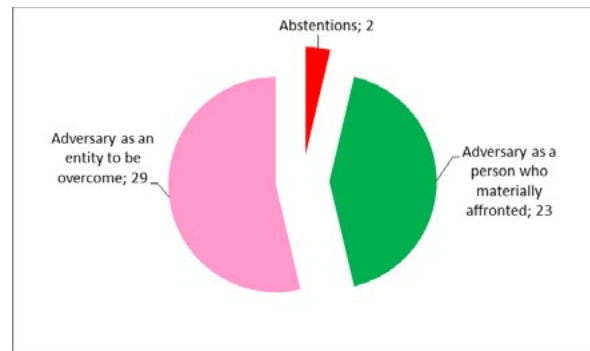


**Figure 18.** What do you fight for?  
Source: Author's own research.

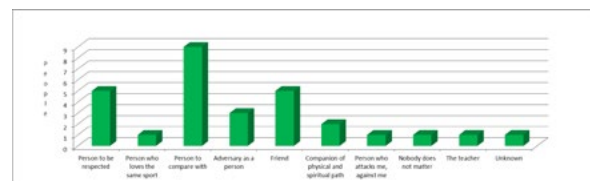
**Q11: Who is the opponent?**

Very interesting to note is the difference attribution of the meaning of the opponent in the descriptions of the participants: who identifies him as a person physically

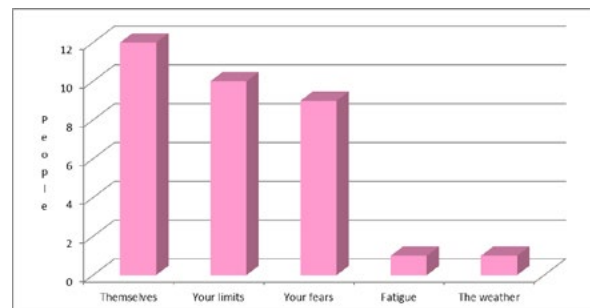
present (23 people), but does not lose his humanity, as if he were an enemy, who turns it into self-reflex itself, of his own limits and his own fears, that is, what he considers most difficult to face (29 people).



**Figure 19.** Who is the opponent?  
Source: Author's own research.

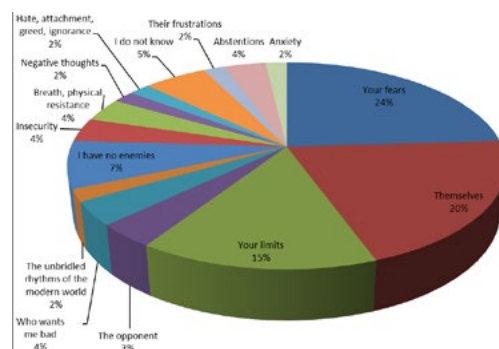


**Figure 20.** Opponent as a Person.  
Source: Author's own research.



**Figure 21.** Opponent as an Entity  
Source: Author's own research.

**Q12: What is your first enemy?**



**Figure 22.** Who is your first enemy?  
Source: Author's own research.

Among all the enemies identified by the participants there is a minimum common denominator: the first enemy is what scares most, what hinders us in our jour-

ney, fears, limits, our emotions (ourselves). But enemy is also a very strong word, which, if understood as a real person, not all find in their own experience.

Q13: *Where are the limits?*

Most of the answers to this question are oriented towards the self-attribution of the responsibility of one’s own limits and consequently the possibility of overcoming them and the resources to be able to do it live in everyone. If we are to set ourselves limits, then we are always the ones who can remove or overcome them, as long as we commit ourselves to the business, even in the case of physical limits it is possible to overcome them with commitment.

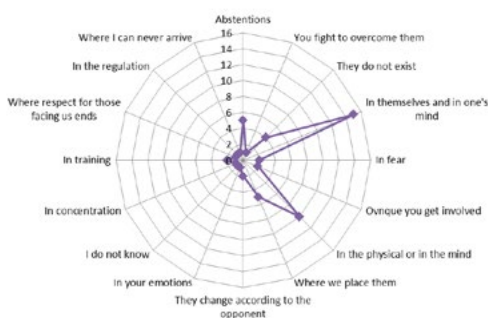


Figure 23. Where are the limits?  
Source: Author’s own research.

Q14: *If you lose a meeting, who is responsible?*

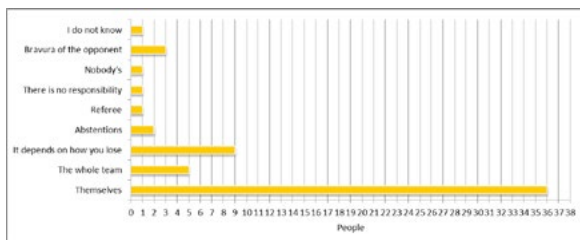


Figure 24. Attribution of responsibility.  
Source: Author’s own research.

Particular is the way in which the answers to this question are structured, since basically if the result obtained does not correspond to expectations, the causes are generally identified outside of oneself; in this case, almost all the participants recognized an intrinsic responsibility. This sense of responsibility can be assumed to be so strong thanks to a powerful perception of self-determination and intrinsic motivation. When what is done is the result of a personal choice, the person is much more motivated in dealing with the challenges that the choice brings into being and its possible negative outcomes. In this case it seems that people have managed to free themselves from the need for external recognition and approval, finding in themselves a reason for satisfaction through the support of positive emotions,

such as the challenge and internal perception of control. The element of guilt is in fact removed, while positive opportunities emerge even in defeat, such as the possibility of improvement.

Q15: *Is the winner the one to thank? And what if he does not win?*

Thanksgiving is a form of recognition and fundamental respect in Muay Thai, an ineluctable and profound respect towards the master expressed also in the tradition of Wai Khru (greeting to the master). From the answers it emerged that in the case of both victory and defeat in equal measure, the gratitude is first of all addressed to his teacher (38 participants in case of victory, 36 participants in case of defeat), but then spread out fanatically to all those that accompany the individual in his experience and even comes to touch even the adversary and the opponent’s master, without forgetting themselves (12 and 11 participants). Curious to note how unlike other cases, when you turn to the opponent thanks in case of defeat (13 participants) exceed the thanks in case of victory (11 participants), it is approached the same situation in the answer «I am encouraged to improve» and both situations are linked to the attribution of responsibility. This assessment to underline how apparently in the event of a defeat we once again thank the adversary, not only because he made himself available for comparison, but also because he was able to teach us something new.

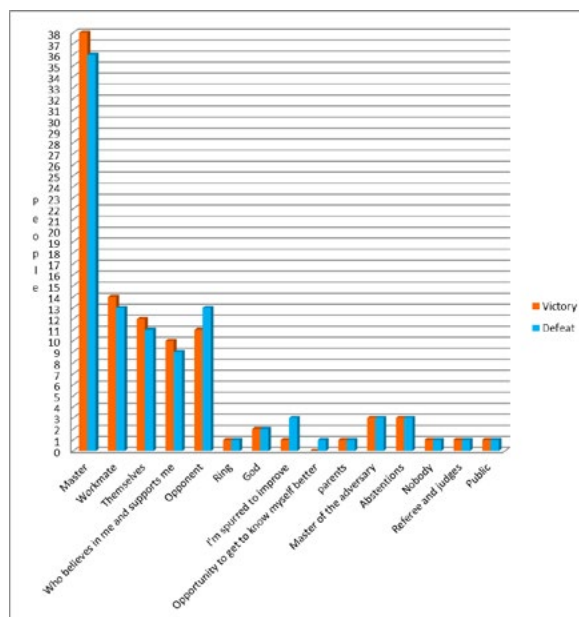
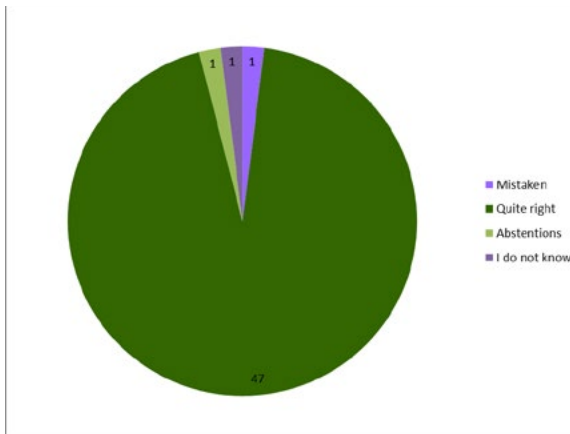


Figure 25. Gratitude.  
Source: Author’s own research.

Q16: *Is it right for children to practice Muay Thai?*

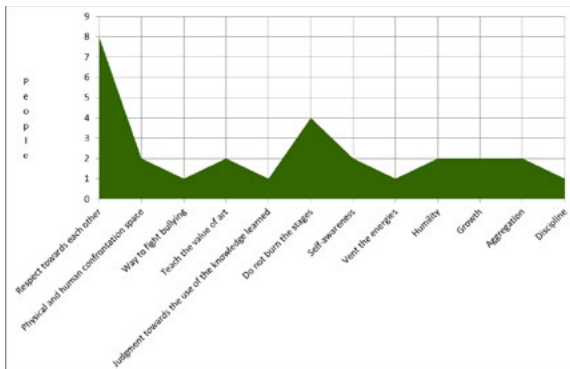
From 47 out of 50 participants the positive attitude of Muay Thai teaching to children is recognised thanks to the values that are transmitted through it.





**Figure 26.** Children who practise Muay Thai  
Source: Author’s own research.

Discipline becomes a space for comparison, in which one becomes aware of one’s own abilities and learns to get to know the other and to respect him. Knowing gives the freedom to choose, so even in a martial art you learn to fight in order to choose not to do it. If you have natural weapons and you do not have the awareness you can use them without wanting, while knowing how to use also gives the responsibility. Discipline, respect, awareness and responsibility are the necessary ingredients in the growth of a student of Muay Thai just starting from the youngest.

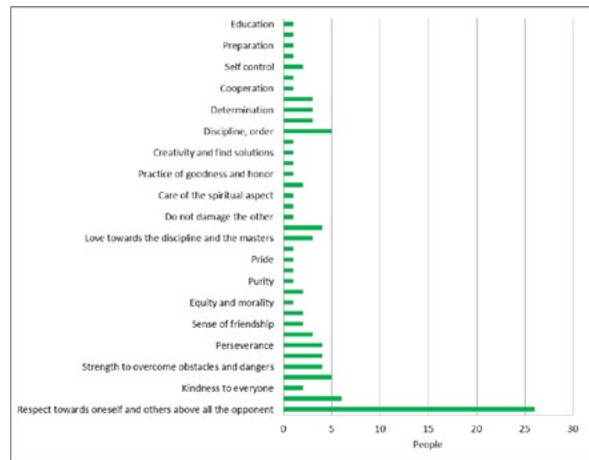


**Figure 27.** Positive aspects of the practice.  
Source: Author’s own research.

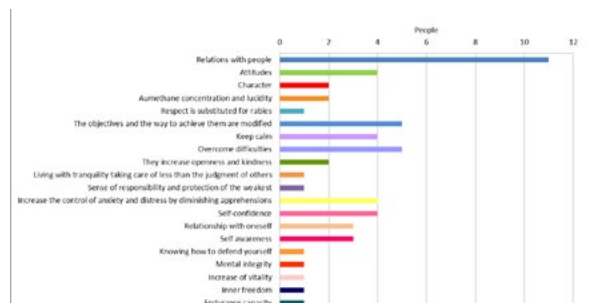
Q17: *What values are transmitted in Muay Thai and how do these values affect your daily life? Which aspects of your life is most influencing the practice of Muay Thai?*

The values mentioned are many and unwind from respect to discipline, from physical strength to kindness of spirit, from sacrifice, to courage, to perseverance.

Moreover, thanks to the path of personal growth and improvement started with the practice of Muay Thai, some participants explain, the values quoted are reversed in everyday life with important effects on their lives, modifying themselves and the way they deal with difficulties and to achieve the objectives, to structure the relationship with others, the way of feeling and acting in the world around them.



**Figure 28.** Transmitted values.  
Source: Author’s own research.



**Figure 29.** Changes in the everyday life.  
Source: Author’s own research.

Q18: *Is it therefore possible to state that the size of the gym, of training and of the ring as spaces in which the discipline is lived can be extended to the rest of its life?*



**Figure 30.** The spaces in which the discipline is lived extend to the whole life.  
Source: Author’s own research.

The experiences we make in the course of our existence, especially the deep and significant ones, are like underwater currents that influence all aspects of our lives. The latter is not divided into watertight compartments, hermetically isolated from each other; on the contrary, living a discipline like Muay Thai, which engages in physical and mental change, will surely have repercussions on all the other aspects of one’s life. In fact, the

size of the gym, training and the ring as spaces where the discipline is lived are considered by 46 participants extendable to the rest of life. Of the remaining 4 participants 2 left the answer blank and 2 others responded with "I do not know".

### Discussion and Participated observation

When we approach with seriousness a martial art like the Muay Thai it triggers a process of change at first impalpable that is gradually becoming concrete in the course of learning. The often shocking start made of extreme effort to reshape your body muscle after muscle, even muscles that you did not suspect the existence of, short breath caught in big puffs that never seem deep enough and mind twisted by thoughts disconnected from the effort and lack of air. I myself did not know how I got to the end of my first training sessions, maybe just for stubbornness. Physical fatigue joins the mental fatigue of learning new gestures far from experience, therefore still ungraceful; the attention is focused on only one part of the body at a time, while one can control one part, another is lost in the automatic return to daily movements. This is perhaps one of the moments of greatest difficulty since the change is not yet visible and the technical skill far away: apparently no result. Such a situation is frustrating in a society where the result must be immediate and gratifying, the commitment without tangible results on the very short term has no value, indeed it is often considered bankruptcy. All those who have studied a martial art know the virtue of perseverance, but those who approach it for the first time naturally ask themselves questions of meaning: why did I choose this discipline? What does it mean to me what I am doing?

More or less consciously, every athlete at the beginning poses this question and it is good that he does so if he intends to give a meaning and consequently a strong motivation to his own experience. Each person will find an initial answer that is not said to remain static over time. In spite of the diversity of responses, in Muay Thai there is constant trust and respect in the Master who with his profound knowledge transforms the thirst of result into a desire for knowledge. Training becomes a meeting between those who dedicate their lives to the teaching of this art and those who engage in their learning. The frenzy turns into concentration, thoughts are focused, the breath becomes controlled and regular.

This slow but constant transformation has a major impact on everyday life: starting to ask questions about the meaning of our actions in a given area does not preclude the possibility of extending them to other situations, our life is in fact not built in watertight compartments and changes are not segregated in the environments in which they begin. Moreover, the doubt towards our actions allows us to make conscious and reasoned choices, no

longer automatic and dictated by the canons of society. The equilibrium that we achieve by taking the position of guard is not only body stability but awareness of our moving in the world, maintaining a firm step even on impervious or unknown terrain, the same stability and security that the mind takes in a difficult moment. Mental and bodily positions are continually accommodated, because they are never found once and for all, nevertheless if we keep alive the adaptation we know that it is possible to face every situation and regain balance. "Actions are the real incarnations of ethical choice; a constant movement, a never perfect balance, a vibration between the in-itself and the outside of oneself." [Siciliani 2017: 75]

Each workout pushes you to face your limits and always adds something more not required but almost necessary, a kick more than the set, one minute more to the *Pao* (hitters) and study and try again and again the shots and techniques. With time a shot will become a series, a minute will become a round and the force will double, the movements will be more loose and the body as separate and partial as we focused it at the beginning can be thought of as an almost harmonious whole. Going one step at a time beyond your limits costs a lot of effort because when you seem to have exhausted the energy even one step is an extreme effort, two then seem impossible. The moment when your teacher raises the *Pao* and tells you "Force one more!" And your mind is screaming "Enough!" Is the moment of choice in which you can decide to go further or give up. Only then, as they taught you, take your breath and with a contraction of abs you breathe air and a line of challenge that accompany a blow again. The Master becomes a mirror of yourself, through his mouth you push yourself to give something more and in his eyes you mirror your own determination supported not by his expectations but by his strength. He prays for you, shares strength and knowledge, you have the right choice and determination. It often happens to see a training partner lower his arms and give up for exhaustion to launch a last attack, at that moment it becomes important the support of the comrades who maybe attend the session of *Pao* that incite him to move forward. The demonstration of confidence of the training partners is fundamental in instilling confidence, since you do not feel alone and perceiving the others' encouragement you can find the necessary determination in themselves to continue. So apparently the Muay Thai is a discipline lived in a solitary way, at most with his teacher, in reality it is a path built together with their fellow training, day by day, sweating together hour after hour, the growth indeed comes in part from the study and partly from the continuous confrontation with those who live with you this discipline. Behind a victory, like a defeat, there are all those who worked with you and with you. The utmost expression of such support and sharing in Muay Thai passes through the *Mongkon* (rope crown

representing the school) in which the strength of all the school fighters who have worn it in the past collects and flows into you, supporting you. The impact on what happens in training reverberates as you search in the water on the rest of a person's life, we begin to understand that the limits are in our mind and that with perseverance and commitment can be modified.

It is not easy when you are debated between the possibility of giving up because you do not feel able to make it and the urge to continue facing a critical situation. There are endless solutions to the obstacles that life poses to us, yet we often give up trying to try some of them because of the limits we set ourselves. The awareness of these limits and knowing that we can overcome them is one of the ways that can push us to continue without blocking ourselves.

“Who knows the halls  
it is, yes, wise  
but who knows himself  
it is then illuminated.  
Whoever wins the others  
it is, yes, powerful  
but who wins himself  
it's much stronger.  
Who has will  
It is resolute”.

*The heavenly rule* – The book of Tao Lao-tzu

With the words of Lao-tzu it becomes easier to understand a concept that often occurs in Muay Thai: it is easier to learn first with the body than with the conscious mind. Normally, in fact, we are focused on the pressing and noisy external world that with its requests engulfs all our attention, while in Muay Thai it is fundamental, especially at the beginning, to focus on listening to your body, its balance, its extensions, so by sinking a blow by turning the hip, give it more power through the thrust of the feet and control the balance to always keep a stable guard. Getting to know each other is the starting point for change, change is movement and movement is life. At the same time every gesture in Muay Thai has a history and a meaning that not only shapes it but above all substance. The unified knowledge of themselves and of each stroke in its entirety will give life to a single movement that glides in the air always coming back to balance, with time the movement will turn into a unique dance in the form for each *Nak Muay* (student of art of Muay Thai) and shared in substance. The alternation between hard strokes like steel and soft like water is the adaptation to the world that we operate in every moment of our life and the awareness of this dance allows us to move to the best of our possibilities. As knowledge progresses, the initial awareness of oneself, of knowledge, of reflection and of the research that pours into ourselves, moves towards the outside with a new attention and awareness towards the world around us, while keeping an eye on interiority. There are no more

blurred images those passing by, but clear moving figures. This perceptual modification is stimulated by the direct experience in the ring, when we climb up we begin to become aware of the other and to confront him and the space that surrounds us. In this place all the masks you have built in showing yourself to the world are not admitted, there are no lies or superfluous words only the space delimited by four strings and who is in it with you. Materially you control the terrain of the battle, you test it with bare feet anchored, taking the measure of distances and recognizing the danger of a corner, you learn even to exploit the ropes to your advantage. Then there is the other that we need to take measures, begin to know him and re-know him in its peculiarities, protect himself from his strongest moves and attack his weaknesses, taking advantage of the time and space of the ring to push him where we want. In a clash there is strategy, preparation, not deceit. There is no trick in one's expression, it would break away at the first drop of sweat. It puts itself into play in combat, without special effects to improve in any way or still image to catch your breath, knowing that the opponent will do the same for a clear and shared respect. Who compares in the ring recognizes the opponent the sacrifices that he had to make: in hard training, discipline, concentration, it is also thanks to his choice to be willing to confront you that you have the opportunity to get involved and the other way around. It is thanks to this authentic form of respect that a Muay Thai fighter will fight to the best of his ability, not only to get involved, but also to honour his opponent and his courage to get in the ring to face it without any veil behind who will hide, and the other will see the same courage in you by honouring him in the same way. Respect and recognition will move you to thank you both for the meeting to bring you a victory or to bring you a defeat and not only thank you but your teacher and his because both have lavished with the same commitment in your education and in your support to the best of their ability. The same ring that casts barefoot during the fight expands becoming a school of life for the world outside the gym. In the same way that one learns to recognize one's adversary, courage and effort are also recognized in the people around us in everyday life. Respect for everyone's journey can even discover an encounter where there is a confrontation or at the most cold indifference, which sometimes is even worse in its sterility. It is also emblematic to note that during a clash, then in a situation where we are strongly under pressure, what we learn remains deeply impressed in the experience, like a brand in focus, that during training we would have spent weeks, if not months, assimilating it. You can learn something from anyone in any situation even the most unexpected. The external world then becomes an extension of our ring and the rules that give it a solid supporting. Just as there are no deceptions there is neither anger nor hate, this is because a mind full of anger,

and even worse than hate, is a clouded mind and to fight well a clear mind is needed, anger leads to an imbalance of mind that inevitably reflects on the body. A practical example is that of a fighter whose judgement clouded by anger makes him attack without taking care of the protection from possible blows and a polished opponent can exploit this weakness by dodging his blows (a shot misses a lot more energy than a shot that goes to sign) until the appropriate time to hit the defenceless target. Balance and stability are therefore essential to the mind and body of a fighter. Another fundamental aspect of this martial art is the experience concerning pain. The fear of pain increases their perception, so you have to work hard to diminish this fear that consequently fears the blows and the opponent. Accepting the pain and letting it flow without attempting to restrain it is a mental attitude that can be developed through meditation and as a result gets its diminution and the possibility of moving the concentration on something else. The first step in meditation is breathing, the apnoea during the practice of martial art materially deprives our muscles and our brain of oxygen, greatly lowering the level of our performance. Learning not to hold your breath but to maintain regular, deep inhalation and exhalation, not alone physical benefits, but allows you to assimilate an inner rhythm that harmonizes with the music that accompanies the combat increases the ability to timing and concentration. This type of breathing allows the ability to let air flow automatically through our body, just as it should be done in the same way with pain. A fundamental aspect of Muay Thai is the ritual dance before the beginning of each meeting, in fact it is now known that there is no Muay Thai without Ram Muay and Wai Khru. My teacher explained to us how the choice to win or lose the challenge that awaited us was done during this dance. As I have been able to see personally perform a good Wai Khru not only reduces the stress of the test but falls in a state of calm clarity and increased awareness, the Ram Muay performed below as well as melt the muscles focus the mind on your goal: the victory, pruning doubts and uncertainties that until recently had gripped the mind, stiffening the body. I have seen athletes perform the ritual dance in a superficial or mechanical way and be deconcentrated during the whole fight, or lose courage in the face of the opponent's determination and end up abandoning the match. If during the dance you cannot reach the right concentration and the necessary abandonment, but you remain focused on the outside world, you lose the ability to align mind and body to your goal, will result in an exaggerated attention on the conditions of surrounding environment, losing concentration on oneself, on the adversary and on the indications coming from one's corner. A well-performed ritual dance involves not only athletes but the entire public attending you. Carried by the music of Sarama you travel through the history of Muay Thai listening to

myths and legends, from which the martial art comes, told in the gestures of the dancers. An ancient narration transmitted by generations of fighters whose emotions emerge immortal in the two athletes who give them life by sharing the same spectators. I listened to those attending the meeting confessing that I was excited during the ritual dance and even show how the skin had physically crawled in the involvement aroused by the emotional sharing of that moment.

## Conclusions

The knowledge of Muay Thai as a martial art in its entirety enriches the identity of a person and, as Mantovani [1998] suggests, it is possible to think no longer in western – Nak Muay binary terms, but in additive terms, both Westerner than Nak Muay. In this journey into knowledge, one redefines the identity of a person in a state of being, continually transformed by reflection and action. The identity clash that is bleeding our time melts in front of these experiences: it is no longer a matter of finding a true original self, but of getting rid of our fears and accepting the complexity of our existence, the infinite facets of our composite identity. Thanks to the wisdom of Muay Thai we are at the same time being hard like steel and soft like water, we can move along the distances (medium, short, long) and move on more levels, we learn to take advantage of time and space up when we do not feel that all this belongs to us, we perceive it as part of us. All this and much more is part of our identity, Muay Thai is one of the ways to make ourselves aware of ourselves, of our uniqueness and of humanity that we share with others.

## References

1. Armezzani M. (2002), *Esperienza e significato nelle scienze psicologiche*, Gius. Laterza & Figli, Bari [in Italian].
2. Bateson G. (1972), *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, (trad. it. *Verso un'ecologia della mente*, 1976, Adelphi, Milano).
3. Cipolletta S. (2004), *Le dimensioni del movimento. La costruzione inter-personale dell'azione*, Guerini e Associati, Milano [in Italian].
4. Lao-tzù (2006), *La Regola Celeste: Il Libro del Tao*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Padova [in Italian].
5. Mantovani G. (1998), *L'Elefante Invisibile*, Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, Firenze [in Italian].
6. Mead G.H. (1934), *Mind, Self & Society* (Trad. it. *Mente, Sé e Società*, 1966, Giunti Editore, Firenze).
7. Merleau-Ponty M. (1945), *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Trad. it. *Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 2003, Bompiani, Milano).
8. Siciliani F. (2017), *Officina del Corpo*, I Libri di Icaro, Lecce [in Italian].