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The Golden Horse Monastery



To THAI Members:
The Golden Horse Monastery
was featured in the excellent
documentary movie "Buddha's
Lost Children" - highly recommended
viewing for those interested in north
Thailand culture. - Editor

"... on top of their monastic duties and equestrian skills - the boys are being indoctrinated into the art of Thai boxing by the fighter-turned-abbot-turned-cowboy..."

An hour's drive north of Chiang Rai, there is a remote hamlet where the River Kam slinks around haystacks, and tall cliffs stand proudly overlooking the valley. Up on one of those lush cliffs sits a monastery shrouded in mystique. If you were to chance upon it by climbing the cliff face, you would be welcomed at the top by a troupe of muay thai boxers. If you entered from the northern side you would find a large rearing horse acting as gatekeeper. But once the statues let you pass, you enter the serene and secluded world of the Archa Tong Forest Monastery, often referred to as 'Wat Maa Tong' The Golden Horse Monastery.

The temple was founded eleven years ago by Phra Kru Ba Neua Chai, previously known nationwide by his Thai boxing fans as Samerchai. In fact, he was preparing to fight the world champion when he suddenly gave it all up to be ordained. Now 41, Phra Kru Ba Neua Chai was born to farmer parents in Chiang Rai district. After leaving Ramkamhaeng University in Bangkok,

he joined the army and built up his reputation as a talented boxer, losing only 3 times in 15 years.

After quitting the fame and excitement of the boxing ring, Samerchai slipped away quietly and headed for the jungle caves in Mae Sai where he sat himself in the lotus position and began meditating. It was there that he experienced what he believes was a vision. For seven nights in a row as he sat in the damp, dark cave, the same vision recurred to him: to go to the Golden Horse, a sacred shrine which, legend has it, has been around since the time of Lord Buddha. (According to local mythology, Buddha even left a sacred footprint there.) The buildings around the shrine had long been abandoned, as it was somewhat remote and the cliffs were overgrown with dark forest. Local villagers from the nearby Mae Kam Valley claimed the hills were haunted and were scared to go up there. In 1992, Samerchai was ordained as a monk and he moved to the Golden Horse alone.



There he meditated, and gained the respect of animist villagers. In the early nineties, the Shan warlord, Khun Sa was kingpin of a massive international drug trade and the mountain passes between Thailand and Burma were continually used for trafficking opium by the deadly armed militia and their caravans of mules.

Finding themselves losing this War On Drugs, the Thai soldiers in the region desperately attempted a new tactic: instead of raking through villages with rifles, they asked local monks to combat the drug

menace by taking dharma to the hilltribe villagers.

After searching far and near for monks to join this programme, they finally they came across Phra Kru Ba Neua Chai, who was willing to take the risks and virtuous enough to lead the fight. As a monk who was also capable of defending himself, he was a perfect choice. Despite the dangers of opposing the drug baron, Kru Ba was undeterred.

In Thailand it is a common practice to make an offering of gratitude to a respected monk if one has a stroke of luck or good karma. And so when a lottery winner donated a horse to the monastery, Kru Ba realised that this creature (that had just been saved from a slaughterhouse) could play an important role in his border patrol plans.

Since then, a total of 500 horses have passed through the monastery. Kru Ba, in turn donates them to the army or to hilltribes who need them. And now the small cliff top monastery is something of a ranch, with bamboo stables, a paddock and mountain tracks. The horses are all saved from slaughter and are usually donated by lottery winners or people who have come to listen to Kru Ba preach.

Not only was he combating drug problems, he also took in orphan boys whose parents had been killed by Khun Sa's militia and ordained them as novices or nen. In that first year, local villagers were impressed to see that the 15 ordained boys were being well cared for. Mainly from Lahu, Yao, Akha and Lua families, the novices were receiving a Buddhist education, being fed and were well disciplined. Word began to spread.

The nen learn to ride when they become ordained at Golden Horse Monastery and as it's a long way to the villages and as the number of mouths needing feeding increases, they ride on horseback when they go out at dawn to seek alms. The nen care for the animals and groom them daily.

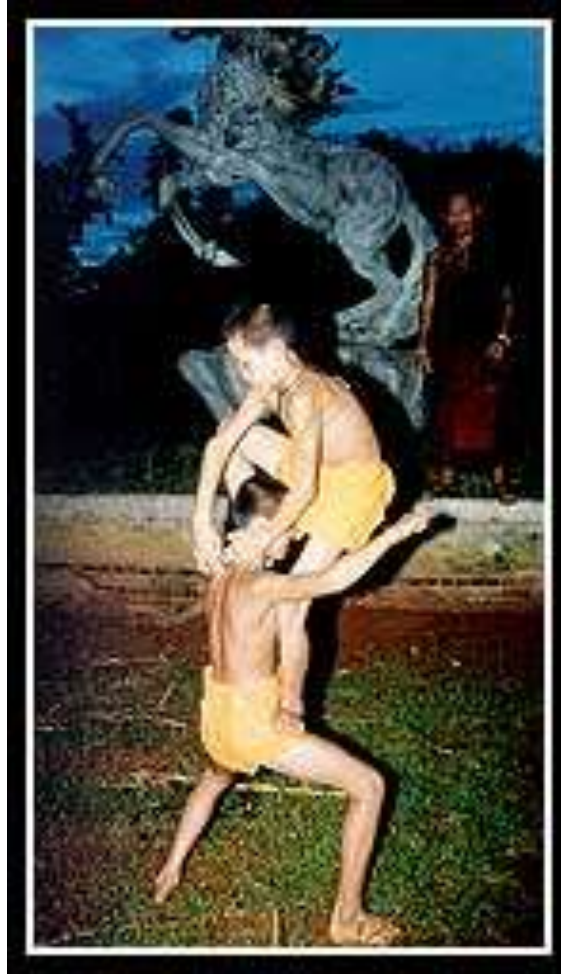
Built on a jungle slope, the Golden Horse at present hosts 30 novices and 9 monks, as well as a few female devotees who are escaping the big city and teach Thai and basic English to the youngsters. Huts are crudely constructed from bamboo and the wet season combined with the galloping horses makes for a muddy, humid environment. The nen have mostly endured hard upbringings, and now - on top of their monastic duties and equestrian skills - the boys are being indoctrinated into the art of Thai boxing by the fighter-turned-abbot-turned-cowboy.

"Boxing for me is something which frees the body and releases the soul from barbarianism," Kru Ba told Citylife recently at his mountaintop temple-cum-ranch. "When I box I use every single part of my body and my mind.

Buddhism teaches you not to harm or take advantage of people which some may find to be in direct opposition to an aggressive looking sport like boxing. For me, boxing helps me to become a better Buddhist. I learn to control my emotions. I find beauty and peace and stillness in boxing. I get rid of my animal instincts and control them to the point that they become beautiful, an art form for sport, for education, for the discovery of truth. The word Thai means freedom and when I practice muay thai I feel free - free from my emotions, from anger."

With the aid of donations and non-financial support from the 3rd army battalion, Phra Kru Ba Neua Chai has also been able to initiate a reforestation program around the temple grounds.

Nowadays, Khun Sa has gone, but he has been replaced by even more vicious drug cartels, especially the Wa Army and their co-conspirators who have been instrumental in smuggling the methamphetamine, ya ba, into Thailand from the Shan State in the past few years. Kru Ba and his nen now lend their horses and accompany the soldiers on sorties around the border villages where ya ba and other drugs are entering rural villages from Burma. The abbot rides on horseback too, and stops at each village to help educate the locals about the dangers of becoming involved in



drugs. He also teaches them about Buddhism, about Thailand, about His Majesty the King, and although sadly many hilltribes do not have Thai citizenship yet, he tries to instill a sense of national pride in them.

Several nen who have now grown up and left the monastery have been offered work as translators of various language groups for the army. Akha, Lisu, Lahu, Cheen Haw (Chinese), Lua, Hmong and Yao boys have all graduated to these positions.

Phra Kru Ba Neua Chai himself cuts a larger than life figure. His personal cult status in the community has been the seed from which this tree of success has grown. The conditions are demanding, but the experience he offers these young hilltribe boys is unique. Undeterred by the perils of opposing drug caravans, the abbot plans to maintain vigilant for many years to come. If there are too many people who wish to join his monastery, he says that he may have to retreat even further into the jungle and set up another post.

Written by Hinsch
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