



CHAPTER 3

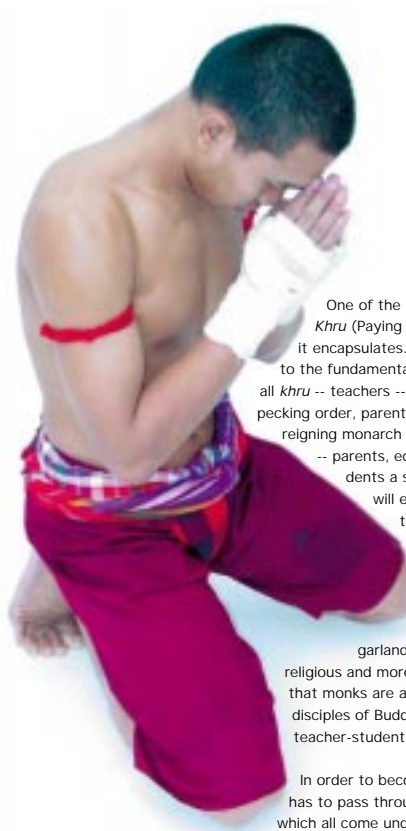
the Tradition of Wai Khru

The following pages present an in-dept study of the unique tradition of *Wai Khru* (Paying Respect to Teachers). Three forms of the ceremony -- Initiation s a Trainee Fighter, Annual Homage-Paying Ceremony and Initiations s a Teacher -- are detailed here, while the forth form -- the Ritual Dance of Homage -- can be found in next chapter as it is very much part of the pre-contest rituals.

For anyone wishing to really understand the central concepts of Muay Thai, a knowledge of at least some of this martial art's unique and rich traditions is an absolute necessity. In fact, for those who are intent on becoming professional fighters or trainers, more than knowledge alone, the precepts and ethics involved have to be come an integral part of their daily lives. Although these traditions are undoubtedly "devout" and imbued with a spirit of religiosity, they are nevertheless independent of any specific creed and therefore are very much accessible to all.



The Concept of Wai Khru



One of the most important traditions of Muay Thai is *Wai Khru* (Paying Respect to Teachers) and the philosophy which it encapsulates. *Wai Khru* is an ancient custom is closely bound to the fundamental Thai concept that providers of knowledge are all *khru* -- teachers -- and are worthy of the utmost respect. In the pecking order, parents are everybody's original teachers, while the reigning monarch is the *khru yai* or headmaster. Between teachers -- parents, educators, trainers or mentors -- and their students a special relationship is believed to exist, one which will endure and leave a lasting impression. Likewise, the bond between those who study under the same teacher is regarded as being parallel to kinship, so that such students refer to each other as *pee nong*, brothers and sisters. When students seek knowledge from their teacher, they first offer symbols of respect: flowers, garlands, joss-sticks and candles. If these seem overly religious and more suited to temple offerings, then bear in mind that monks are also teachers while in their own turn being disciples of Buddha: just two more manifestations of the core teacher-student bond.

In order to become a fully-fledged Muay Thai fighter, a person has to pass through a series of ceremonies or "rites of passage" which all come under the generic heading of *Wai Khru*.

First comes the Initiation as a Trainee Fighter Ceremony, in which the *khru muay* (Muay Thai teacher) not only accepts young fighters as his student, but in return pledges to teach them to the best of his ability. After fighters have been accepted by a teacher, they must demonstrate good conduct, diligence, endurance and other comparable virtues, in addition to training as hard as they can and following implicitly all the teacher's rules.

During their long apprenticeship, young fighters will experience many times the second type of *Wai Khru* ritual, the Annual Homage-Paying Ceremony. This is an annual ceremony, held so that young fighters can pay respect to their teachers -- and to the souls of teachers who have long since passed away -- and culminates in a performance of the Ritual Dance of Homage, the third form of *Wai Khru*.

After training has been underway for some time, they will be sent to take part in a contest, preceded by a performance of the Ritual Dance of Homage as a public declaration of their allegiance to their teacher. It is only when fighters have passed all these three milestones (i.e. initiation, training and participation in contests) that they are entitled to regard themselves as real Muay Thai fighters.

Whether or not fighters can advance to the rank of teacher themselves, it is a decision which lies in the hands of their own teacher...and the process can take a considerable time. The fighters must first have taken part in numerous contests, proved themselves to have advanced practical skills and have done the equivalent of "teacher training" in both Muay Thai theory and practice, as well as having the right attitude and character. In addition, age plays a part because in Oriental cultures, age and wisdom advance hand in hand. Generally speaking, thirty and over is considered a suitable age for being elevated to the position of *khru muay*.

It is only when fighters have satisfied their teacher on all these counts that they can participate in the fourth *Wai Khru* ritual, the Initiation as a Teacher Ceremony which bestows on them the rank of *khru muay* and which once again involves the performance of the Ritual Dance of Homage.

For all forms of the *Wai Khru* rituals except the Ritual Dance of Homage, Thai fighters have a choice of position while they are paying homage. They can:

- a. kneel sitting back on their heels
- b. half-sit half-kneel with in the "mermaid pose"

The important factor is that the fighters' heads must be lower than that of their teacher, symbolizing their lower status and respect.



Initiation as a Teacher

(K r o b K h r u - ค ร อ บ ค รุ)

In the *Krob Khru* ceremony, Muay Thai students who have all the necessary qualifications are elevated to the rank of teachers themselves. The teacher has first to consider which students are sufficiently knowledgeable and technically skillful to be worthy of promotion to the ranks of instructor. After the selection has been made, the *Krob Khru* ceremony is held to publicly announce and promote the chosen students who then become teachers in their own right, entitled to pass on the skills and traditions of Muay Thai to students of their own. As in *Kuen Khru*, the teachers-elect offers the traditional symbols of respect to their teacher, who then makes the official proclamation:

“Today is a propitious day, and this hour of good omen. You have proved yourself to be a person of virtue and knowledge, skilled in the art of Muay Thai, to the extent that you are now worthy of becoming a teacher yourself. I therefore appoint you a newly-created Muay Thai teacher at this *Krob Khru* ceremony, capable of instructing others in this noble art. Always remember your duty to preserve the traditions and art of Muay Thai. Be a person of good conduct and apply your knowledge and abilities in such a way as to benefit both yourself and the community”.

