

## Addiction and Buddhist Shamanism - The Bamboo Caves Monastery<sup>1</sup>

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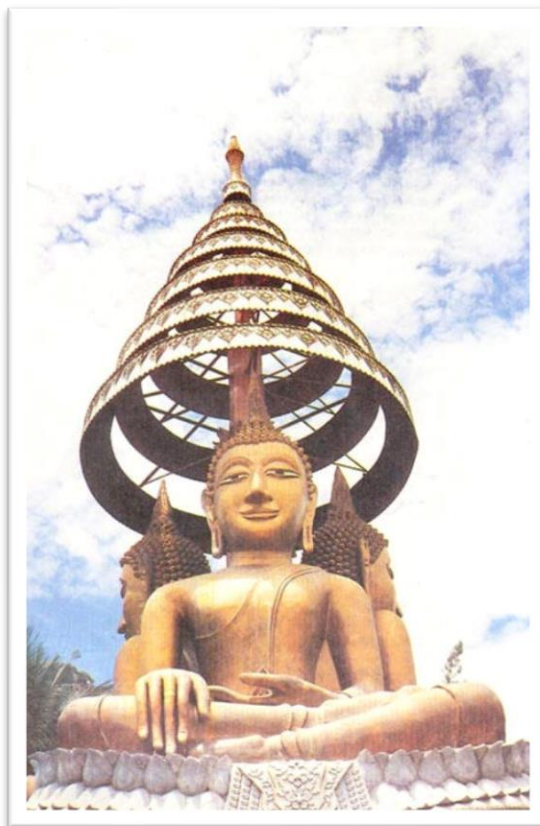
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130 kilometers northeast of Bangkok, Thailand's capital, the train took me to Lopburi, from where I reached the Buddhist monastery of Wat Tham Krabok<sup>23</sup> just outside the city. Ever since I'd read Surya Green's article<sup>4</sup> on the original treatment of drug addiction there, I'd wanted to go there personally and learn from this unique experience. I was about to reach my goal. In the midst of tropical vegetation, surrounded by the circus of rocky Prong Prab hills, I discovered a group of buildings and small houses adorned everywhere with enormous meditative Buddhas. A man in an ochre robe, with a shaved head, was crouching on a pile of heaped stones. Fingers protected by rustic rubber or leather mittens, he methodically struck huge stones that he reduced to the size of gravel. He was a monk, smiling and calm, who exuded great inner peace despite what seemed to me a boring daily grind. With the same serenity, amid the scent of mangoes and lemon verbena, for over thirty years, the Tudong monks have been welcoming thousands of Thai and foreign drug addicts and providing them with extremely rapid, effective and unconventional treatment.

### A charismatic figure

The development of the Tham Krabok monastery and its therapeutic activities are directly linked to the charismatic personality of its superior, Abbot Phra Chamroon Parnchand.

He was born in Lopburi in 1926 and later moved to Bangkok to study. In 1945, at the age of 20, he joined the Royal Thai Police, where he quickly demonstrated his skills, to the point of winning an award in 1948 for his services in the suppression of crime. He dedicated himself



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<sup>1</sup> Article published in Takiwasi Magazine, No. 2, pp. 57-78, Takiwasi Ed., Tarapoto, Peru, 1993, revised in May 2024. At the end of the article we propose a brief presentation with photos of the founding monks of the monastery and some photos taken during an 8-day stay in Tham Krabok in 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Wat Tham Krabok, Phra Phutthabat, Saraburi 18120, Thailand.

<sup>3</sup> Video: Thamkrabok: The Monastery of the Opium Pipe, <https://wat-thamkrabok.org/thamkrabok-the-monastery-of-the-opium-pipe/>

<sup>4</sup> Surya GREEN, "Curing drug addiction in Thailand", The CoEvolution Quarterly, Box 428, Sausalito Ca 94966, USA, spring 1982, pp. 76-80.

to the detection, arrest and prosecution of drug traffickers. As time passed and he rose through the ranks, the dangers of his job increased:

"I realized I had to find something to reduce the risks," Phra Chamroon recalls. "Most Buddhists look for an external power, something like a secret of nature. I had noticed a legendary metal that was supposed to give its owner supernatural protection against all kinds of adversity. As I began to search for it, I felt a growing power within me. Little by little, a wisdom emerged that strengthened my confidence to evolve in dangerous situations without being affected.

"Then one day, as I was sitting in a meditative pose, which is not a strange practice in Thailand, I had a vision. I saw a monk dressed in a light brown robe. He asked me: 'If there's something better than the metal you're looking for, would you accept it?' I said yes. Then my interest in that metal vanished. I wanted that "something better". To find out what it was all about, what was left but to follow the monk's path? That seemed to be the message of my vision."

To follow this path, he goes to meet his aunt, a mystic who is highly respected for her spiritual dimension. In Thailand, the role of Buddhist nuns is generally limited to serving the monks. In her case, her aura was such that a growing number of monks approached her for spiritual guidance. In this role of spiritual leader, she was considered asexual and affectionately referred to as Luang Poh Yai, "Very Reverend Father". Some regarded her as a true saint endowed with astonishing supernatural powers and spiritual enlightenment.

Guided by Luang Poh Yai, the 27-year-old colonel left the police force to become an ordained monk in the esoteric Tudong monks' sect. He also left behind a wife and two daughters: "I left a small responsibility to carry a much bigger one," adds Phra Chamroon.

His initiation began during his first five years in various regions of Thailand and Cambodia. He had to live alone, isolated in the jungle or in caves, according to Tudong tradition. He recalls long fasts. One of the lessons he likes to quote from those days: "It's easier to live with wild animals in the jungle than with the men of our time."

He returned to his aunt, who served as his guide and spiritual master until her death in 1970. His younger brother joined him and continues to advise him at the monastery, devoting himself to research and artistic work. In 1957, he joined 9 Tudong monks to live in the caves in the Prong Prab hills. Due to the cylindrical shape of the caves, they are known as "bamboo caves" or "tham krabok" in Thai. They gave rise to the present-day monastery (wat in Thai). In 1959, as the number of monks reached 30, the Thai government decreed a ban on opium consumption. Due to the influence of Chinese merchants, traditional opium consumption had long existed. From one day to the next, many people, even the elderly, found themselves in an illegal situation. Some sought advice from the monks to stop their chronic opium consumption.

Phra Chamroon recalls: "A peasant who was smoking opium approached me. I couldn't tell him to go away, but I didn't know how to get him to stop this old addiction. Instinctively, I told him: "The lotus is a sacred flower. Whenever you want to consume opium, chew a lotus flower instead." Then I consulted my aunt and she dictated a composition of purgative plants and we talked about the meaning of *sajja* or sacred vow. "That's how the monks and patients came to know me.

By 1960, the Tham Krabok monastery had 60 monks and, by 1962, 10,000 drug addicts were being treated, although in those days there were no patient registers or publicity about the treatment. The treatment was

perfected and soon acquired its current formula, which has remained unchanged for 30 years. A strictly anonymous register of patients was set up, making it possible to discreetly welcome drug addicts from all walks of life: the indigenous tribesman of the Golden Triangle in north-west Thailand, the opium smoker (3,000 have been treated), the young heroin addict from the Bangkok suburbs, the policeman or civil servant snorting cocaine, the European “junkie” wandering around Asia with “weed”... Contrary to popular belief, Phra Chamroon points out that, in his experience, pseudo-innocent marijuana (ganja or kancha in Thailand) “ruins the person, is more resistant to treatment and depresses the nervous system and human quality”.

In 1975, Phra Chamroon Parnchand became famous when he was awarded the Ramón Magsaysay Prize, considered the equivalent of the Nobel Prize for Asian countries, “for curing thousands of drug addicts with a highly effective, albeit unorthodox, herbal and spiritual treatment”.

In over thirty years of operation, Tham Krabok Monastery has received some 80,000 patients, and Phra Chamroon claims a 70% success rate. The monastery is well known in Thailand and neighbouring countries. Some foreign television reports have attracted foreign patients (Europe, USA, Australia), who now account for around 5% of residents. Patients of both sexes are accepted, but women, who account for 20% of drug addicts in Thailand, represent only 5% of candidates for internment. The typical patient at Tham Krabok is a young (and increasingly so every year) male heroin addict. Every day, 5 to 20 new candidates arrive to try Tham Krabok's original treatment.

At 67, Phra Chamroon is trying to prepare his succession: “I'm getting too old to climb coconut palms. But I can use my knowledge to get others up there.” He is surrounded by around 150 monks and nuns, 40% of whom are former drug addicts treated at Tham Krabok.

## **Treatment**

During my 8-day stay at Tham Krabok in 1990, I was free to observe the patients' approach. Phra Achim, a former German junkie treated there and now a monk, did me the favor of guiding me and translating the interviews for me, since hardly anyone spoke a language other than Thai. Phra Achim had returned to Germany for 4 years after his treatment at Tham Krabok, but eventually decided to come back to Thailand to devote himself to the monastic life.

When a drug addict comes to Tham Krabok, he is welcomed between 1pm and 5pm. He fills in a form with the history of his addiction and a brief biographical description. The monk in charge of reception asks the inevitable question: “Do you have a sincere desire to give up your addiction forever?” At the slightest doubt or hesitation in answering, the candidate is simply rejected. The patient's motivation is considered essential to the success of the treatment. Phra Chamroon explains: “Any addict can stop using if he or she is determined enough to do so. Successful recovery depends on this decision.”

Such a decision is reinforced by the fact that only one possibility of recovery is open to each individual: there are no second chances. In fact, it's possible that a potential repeat offender has been discreetly accepted, since the Monastery has a reputation for not refusing help to anyone.

If accepted, the patient freely signs a document in which he or she knowingly agrees to temporarily (10 days) alienate his or her will to the monks. This means that they will not give in to his pleas, especially during the initial phase of detoxification (5 days), when the withdrawal syndrome sometimes manifests

itself most intensely. The patient remains under the constant supervision of the monks, who can make decisions on his behalf during this period.

Addicts hand over their personal belongings and money, which will be returned to them in full when they leave. In a room set aside for this purpose, the subject is thoroughly searched (in case there are any hidden drugs) and given the monastery's clothing, a sarong for women and shorts or a red loincloth with a white polo shirt for men. This uniform, well known in the region, will immediately identify him if he escapes from the Monastery, with the risk of being arrested by the police and brought back to the Monastery.

The first and most important step in the process is the vow taken by all new residents at 6 p.m. on the same day. This vow, or SAJJA, is taken before the image of Lord Buddha, seated serenely on a simple altar, in a small, incense fragrant temple. Non-Buddhists address their God or the Universe. Sajja is a commitment never again to use drugs, sell them or incite anyone else to use them. As the Abbot of Tham Krabok points out, "the sajja or vow inaugurates a new stage without erasing the past. When a branch is torn from a tree, planted and left to grow, the old trunk remains".

The residents then go to the treatment center, where a monk briefly explains what they can and cannot do at the monastery during their stay. From that moment on, they abstain completely and immediately from the drugs they usually consume.

Purification with medicinal plants begins immediately. The patients, fasting since at least midday, squat in a row in one part of the courtyard, and receive a dose or so of the famous yotak, a decoction of a hundred medicinal plants, roots and barks. Most of the medicinal plants used grow around the monastery, the rest (20%) come from different parts of the country. After a brief wait of 5-10 minutes for the decoction to take effect, the subject ingests a large quantity of water (up to 5-7 liters). Patients who have successfully completed this initial 5-day phase help beginners to quickly ingest as much water as possible. Another group encourages them with songs, applause, jokes and the beat of huge drums. Numerous songs have made the rounds in Thailand, and some phrases can be seen written on city walls, like this song:

*"It's really time to stop  
If you don't quit this time, you'll die  
You've smoked and injected too long  
It's time to stop  
If you become an old addict  
You'll suffer terrible diseases  
Everyone will know if you go back to drugs  
You'll always be wounded inside  
If you don't stop this time, you'll die."*

Within minutes of ingesting the potion, patients begin vomiting violently and dramatically for 15 to 30 minutes. The purge takes effect by expelling the drug from the body. This painful phase is a key part of the treatment. The tired patient bathes and drinks a hot broth - rice soup with a few vegetables - and egg soaked

for 2 days in salted water, before resting in the room reserved for the first phase of treatment. In this room, with mattresses next to each other, patients remain under lock and key for five days, leaving only accompanied by monks for healing sessions (emetic potion and sauna). A bathroom with shower is provided. Food is delivered by a counter.

Phra Chamroom affirms that treatment by vomiting has several important psychological and physical effects. Nausea is one of the main symptoms of drug withdrawal, a symptom, he says, that is constantly dreaded by new patients. Overcoming nausea by inducing severe vomiting is part of the treatment and makes a profound impression on the patient. Firstly, it gives him the feeling of having been effectively purged of all narcotics. Secondly, says Phra Chamroom, “severe vomiting masks the abstinence syndrome, so most patients tolerate and forget the withdrawal symptoms”. Thirdly, it induces physical weakness, enabling patients to sleep well without the use of sedatives. Fourthly, the practice is perceived as a kind of punishment. It should have a chastening effect, preventing a former addict from falling back into his old habits.

On the following days, at dawn, the same vomiting cure is repeated until the end of the fifth day. In the afternoon, patients spend half an hour in the herbal steam sauna, where they continue to eliminate toxic waste accumulated in the body. This elimination through sweat is aided by the ingestion of other bitter depurative potions. A ritual line-up of disciplined patients, led by a monk, can be seen making their way to one of the two saunas each afternoon. They pass a stone mound where our monk from the beginning continues, unperturbed, to hammer away at the rock. After the sauna, another monk activates the oven to heat the 150 liters of water in which he has previously mixed a few plants (lemongrass, castor oil, volubilis). He's a singular monk, a black giant: Phra Gordon is a son of Harlem who studied sociology and then found himself involved in the Vietnam War. During a trip, he discovered Tham Krabok and decided to stay.

At 6:30 p.m., patients are obliged to take a few herbal tablets made at the monastery, this time eliminated rectally. Patients can massage each other to cope with muscle cramps and withdrawal pains. Monks are not allowed to touch the body of another human being, so they can't perform massages either.

During this phase of treatment, patients are not allowed to use soap, shampoo, detergents or toothpaste, as these produce an adverse effect to that of the medicinal plants, apparently due mainly to the odors released by these toiletries.

At all times, a monk is on hand to answer patients' queries, talk to them and advise them. The atmosphere is fraternal and cordial. And it remains so for the rest of the stay.

At the end of this first phase, the patient is considered drug-free. He then moves on to another area, where he stays for at least another five days to recuperate and rest, his body still impregnated with the plants he has ingested. This time, the doors are open, but he cannot go beyond the patio, which is clearly delimited by a small wall. Patients are invited to work on the monastery's various tasks, gardens and workshops, always under the supervision of a monk. If they prefer to rest, they are not obliged to work. They also have access to magazines and books.

After ten days, the basic treatment is considered complete and the patient can ask to leave. However, it is recommended that they stay for a month, to give them time to assess their future prospects. This is what most patients experience. Ideally, Phra Chamroom considers that 4 to 6 months are needed to bring about a complete life transformation. In any case, after ten days, the patient is again invited to take the *sajja* (vow),

this time in good health and with a clear mind. In addition, Phra Chamroon teaches a personal mantra written on a piece of paper, which the patient is asked to memorize instantly, and then to swallow the piece of paper immediately. The mantra is kept secret. At the same ceremony, the patient is given a medal to protect him/her. Whenever the patient feels ill or in danger, he or she can reconnect with Tham Krabok and the protective force it emanates. The mantra consists of two or three words in the sacred language of Pali, and must be recited repeatedly. It usually consists of the beginnings of phrases taken from sacred scriptures. Finally, patients exchange their white loincloth for a red one, signifying their change of status within the monastery. Some patients wish to join the monastery as monks. Tham Krabok's rules allow them to commit to a monastic life for a set period and then return to normal life. It is traditional in Thai society for men to devote a few months or years of their youth to living as monks, shaving their heads and wearing monastic vestments. Patients can take part in daily meditations and prayers at the temple if they wish. There is no religious obligation. However, meditation is a valuable resource for patients once they leave the monastery.

From the tenth day onwards, taking herbal tablets is optional. After the working day, the sauna bath takes place at 2.30pm. Throughout their stay at Tham Krabok, patients are advised to take frequent showers to facilitate purification. Family members are not allowed visitors for the first five days. If they bring food, the monks check it before handing it over. During treatment, food is good and varied, but cold or iced food is totally excluded. We have attended visits by school groups who have come as a preventive measure to observe the concrete effect of drugs on flesh-and-blood subjects. The spectacular collective vomiting is impressive enough to convince children and teenagers of the suffering involved in taking drugs.

Finally, patients are offered vocational training in one of the Monastery's workshops: carpentry, metalwork, sewing, electronics, music, medicinal plant processing, horticulture, statue-making and so on. Returning to the same environment and social circle increases the risk of recidivism. The aim of this preparation is to give the subject different perspectives on life after leaving the monastery. The confidence of those around him in the value of the treatment is also very important in reinforcing the subject's recovery. Phra Chamroon insists on the patient achieving total change through healing and the sajja's commitment: "People who have been healed here are already different people. If relatives have the slightest doubt about this, it's tantamount to pushing them back onto drugs."

As far as the economic aspect is concerned, it's worth pointing out that the healing process is free of charge, with the monks providing food, care and even a daily allowance for toiletries. Cigarettes are also provided for patients who are allowed to smoke tobacco outside the premises. Nor is it uncommon to see a monk smoking a cigarette. The cost of treatment for the 10 key days is 50 US dollars. Patients contribute financially if they can and wish to do so. They also have the opportunity to reward the monastery by taking an active and voluntary part in daily tasks. The reason for the free care is that no patient should be prevented from seeking help for financial reasons. Phra Chamroon also points out that this treatment gives patients a sense of indebtedness to the Monastery, which can only be repaid by remaining drug-free and true to their solemn vow.

### **Natural medicine and spirituality**

Despite, or perhaps because of, the success of the heterodox treatment offered by Phra Chamroon at Tham Krabok, he had to face criticism on a number of different fronts, usually opposed but here, curiously, in

collusion. Opposition came from both the mainstream scientific community and the traditional Buddhist religious community, as well as from legalistic government representatives.

The Ministry of Health prefers to ignore it, because otherwise it would first have to be detained for the illegal practice of medicine... As a result, it does not support the monastery, and shows no interest in studying the methodology used to assess the country's growing drug problem.

According to Phra Chamroon, all countries are trying to minimize the incidence of drug addiction, and in Thailand he estimates that it affects almost a million people.

On the other hand, some scientists criticize Tham Krabok's treatment for lacking scientific criteria. They question the treatment's 70-75% success rate, as the patient registry does not comply with the methodology they advocate. The monastery claims that patients are followed up at 6 months and one year after discharge, through letters sent to their homes and information provided by friends and family. Letters and postcards sent by the monastery received a 50 percent response. These responses indicate that only around 30 percent of patients have returned to drugs: most of these are in Bangkok, where drugs are readily available. "The patients most likely to recover are those with families and jobs," comments Phra CHAMROON. However, in keeping with their promise of anonymity, the monks do not allow access to their archives. Phra Chamroon responds to these criticisms as follows:

"I believe my statistics are correct. Why do I have to prove anything to others? The proof for me is more than enough. If I believed that my first patients had been lying to me for 30 years, I wouldn't continue to treat them. Instead of criticizing us, why don't the skeptics send us patients here? We can learn more from direct experience than from numbers on a piece of paper."

Phra Chamroon classifies 60 percent as relatively easy cases and 40 percent as difficult. He notes that 10 percent of patients are indeed cured by the mere fact of their arrival at the Monastery; psychologically, they have already rejected drug use and are physically determined to do so.

Phra Chamroon and others familiar with the work at Tham Krabok point out that the situation there is different from that found elsewhere; treatment is administered by Buddhist monks in a monastery located in a country with a Buddhist majority. The monks are dealing with a people whose beliefs are based on animism, spirits and the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation, which condemns to an inferior condition in the afterlife for any fault committed therein, with no possibility of acquiring forgiveness or grace at the last minute.

The former police colonel in charge of the National Narcotics Suppression Center confirmed this attitude, saying that Tham Krabok patients "expose themselves to the condemnation of all the spirits of their religion if they do not keep their promise, and most of them truly believe that this will happen."

However, it is a priori extremely surprising that the Buddhist community itself should criticize an illustrious religious representative who, through his actions, has promoted like few other monks an approach to Buddhism beyond national borders.

Phra Chamroon not only created an original treatment, but also a new Buddhist order adapted to the objectives he pursued and his vision of Buddhism. By tradition, Theravada Buddhist monks (literally: "way of the ancients") confine themselves to study and meditation, refusing to engage in individual human problems. Phra Chamroon, on the other hand, believes in active engagement for the well-being of others.

In other words, he violated the Vinaya, an over 3,000-year-old code of conduct for Buddhist monks. This code forbids, for example, strenuous physical labor, whereas at Tham Krabok the monks themselves construct the buildings, carry the sacks of corn and cultivate the land.

Women are well cared for, whereas traditionally a monk cannot even receive a cup of tea from a woman. Relations between monks and nuns, very strict in a traditional setting, seem cordial and natural at Tham Krabok.

However, the Tudong sect has established strict and clear requirements for the monks of Tham Krabok: they may not touch money for personal use, they eat nothing from midday until the following morning, they may not travel with any means of transport other than their feet. To receive the Magsaysay Award from the Philippine ambassador, Phra Chamroon had to walk the 260 km to Bangkok and back. Every year, the monks make a group walk lasting around 9 days (in some cases, months), carrying the bare necessities on their shoulders. They walk in line along the roads, carrying a large parasol to protect them from the sun during the day, to which they attach a mosquito net to use as a tent at night. This pilgrimage or tudong aims to “accumulate wisdom by limiting physical comfort, in order to achieve inner happiness”.

It's worth noting that even some advocates of the methodology proposed at Tham Krabok seem to accept it, only to amputate its essentials. Phra Chamroon insists at every opportunity that herbal remedies play an important but secondary role in the treatment, since the essential is spiritual. Western culture's classic taboos on the “religious” manifest themselves in a permanent attempt to reduce the phenomena of the Spirit to mere psychological games. In other words, they deprive the author of the treatment himself of a modicum of intelligence about his actions and conduct. While it's true that Phra Chamroon himself doesn't ignore psychological factors, and even handles them with skill and finesse, he doesn't stop at this psychosomatic conception of the human being, and insists on introducing into the human equation the spiritual unknown, its Trinitarian dimension.

Among the psychological supports for treatment, we note: Thai society's great traditional respect for monks in general; the patient's initial motivation, stimulated by the extreme value placed on personal commitment; the active accompaniment of the most advanced patients in the care of newcomers; the kind and fraternal treatment by very dedicated monks, day and night. Patients are not regarded as criminals or perverse, abnormal beings. They know that many of the monks caring for them have walked the same path and managed to save themselves. The atmosphere at Tham Krabok is both strict and free; firmness and affection, authority and respect. Within a clearly defined, non-negotiable framework, there is ample room for flexibility and a humane approach. All these factors, properly applied, play an undeniable role. In popular belief, taking drugs again after passing through Tham Krabok is tantamount to death or total disgrace. Phra Chamroon admits: “Success is not only due to medicinal plants. Only 20% is due to medicines, while the motivation to renounce drugs by entering the monastery is a powerful healing force.”

The spiritual essence is expressed around the vow or *sajja*. *Sajja* is a Pali word found in Buddhist texts that has the broad meaning of embracing truth, loyalty, purity and honesty. All agree that *sajja* is the most effective part of the treatment, but the most difficult: the patient must keep it for the rest of his or her life. The patient's motivation is formalized and reaches sacred dimensions through the ritualization of the commitment.

"History shows that the Buddha's actions were excellent. This excellence has enough power to influence others. The addict connects to this excellence through the *sajja* and the one receiving the vow."



When asked by Surya Green<sup>5</sup> if addiction isn't replaced by the dependency created by the wish, Phra Chamroon answers frankly: "Yes. You have to depend up to the point where you no longer have to depend."

Generally speaking, many addiction therapies offer religious or social support. As long as the bond with the group is maintained, the treatment works and abstinence is achieved; when the bond dissolves, the risk of a return to addiction is great. In this case, Tham Krabok creates a more subtle relationship of security and protection through the spiritual bond represented by the *sajja*, a bond internalized as a commitment to the image of divinity conveyed by every human being. The presentation of the final mantra and medal materializes the invisible channel of communication with the Monastery and the Abbot and, through them, with the divinities or universal forces invoked during the *sajja*.

The dimensions of spiritual power at play are revealed when Phra Chamroon clarifies the meaning of *sajja*:

"The real meaning of *sajja* is 'truth'. Truth means that you do what you say. But just as important as who gives the vow is who receives it. It must be someone carefully chosen. Someone who commands respect and is a role model. The one who makes the vow is an empty battery that the one who receives it must recharge. If they're on the same level, there's no advantage. "

This encounter with a sacred dimension, fostered by Tham Krabok through the *sajja*, while taking into account Thailand's religious context, is not an attribute of the Thai man, nor of Asian countries in general. As the Abbot of Tham Krabok points out, it reaches into the depths of human nature:

"The Thai people have faith in religion: I'm addressing that point. But everyone, East or West, has a *sajja* in their mind or heart, something they believe in. It's up to those developing therapeutic methods, wherever they may be, to formulate a *sajja* appropriate to their own cultural context."

The *sajja* is not a contract with society, nor a moral rule external to the subject, but a proper commitment to the Spirit itself that inhabits every human being and animates the universe. It is not a vow linked to any religious institution, but rather an intimate promise not to destroy oneself. In subjects who have largely lost their sense of responsibility, this attitude gives them back authority over their addiction and over "collective evil", a fulcrum from which they regain control over their personal destiny and their participation in social dynamics.

As Phra Achim, who wandered for years as a drug addict and trafficker in all the countries of Eastern Europe and experienced the prisons of Turkey, eloquently commented: "If you look for a reason that led an addict to drugs, you offer him an excuse. This doesn't help him; on the contrary, this justification excuses him. You have to admit you've done the wrong thing, without any justification. "Not all poor people take drugs!"

Phra Chamroon clarifies this dimension of *sajja*:

"For my part, I would like to receive a vow from all the peoples of the world. A vow not to self-destruct, and not even to say it or think it. If everyone took part in this vow, we'd have a world without weapons or wars." In other words, by building inner peace, outer peace is established too.

As you can see, it's not just a matter of murmuring a few words to accomplish a formality; Phra Chamroon presents this act in spiritual or energetic terms, as any good healer would.

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<sup>5</sup> Surya GREEN, "Thailand's miracle worker", Sawasdee Profile, pp. 32-37.

It's easy to see that Phra Chamroon is discreetly mobilizing powerful healing forces that stem from his deep-rooted nature as a therapist, inherited from ancestral sources. We know that his father knew all about medicinal plants. His long initiation gave him healing powers in the same way as all shamanic initiation traditions. Some say he largely inherited his late aunt's powers.

Phra CHAMROON's reputation for his rare powers of perception and prophecy has benefited the monastery financially. Today, many people come to the monastery for business advice, and the main source of income is the share of profits they give up in gratitude.

We heard many healing stories during our stay at Tham Krabok. His kind secretary and translator, Rambhai Singhsumalee, explained how, in times of need, Phra Chamroon could use his personal power to “charge” any leaf or plant within reach with his energy and use it as medicine:

"Sometimes the Abbot asks for any plant from which he takes three leaves to treat, for example, a patient's headache, although the plant is not known to possess this virtue. He also uses its saliva to stop bleeding from a wound or deflate an inflamed knee..."

Surya Green recounts how one day he saw a woman approach the abbot with a sick baby in her arms. Without a word, he grabbed a bottle containing a herbal potion and held it in his hands for a moment. Then he blew into the bottle. The woman left happy with her remedy. This procedure obviously evokes the traditional “soplada” found in many healing traditions around the world.

During our talks, I saw how people waited until the end of the conversation to pick up the half-full glass of tea he had left on the table and drink it greedily, considering that what the Abbé touched had healing power. On another occasion, while he was talking to me and staring at me, a seemingly mentally disturbed individual approached him and, with many contortions, began touching his arm and back, then rubbing his head as if retrieving some miraculous substance from the Abbot's body to smear himself with. The latter remained unperturbed, carrying on the conversation as if this man didn't exist, without expressing rejection, annoyance or any indirect attention, while this man seemed extremely happy with this grace.

But it was my own experience that convinced me most deeply. The Abbot's treatment of me was apparently cold and harsh at first, until he burst into a generous laugh that lit up his face as we spoke. He had previously made me wait several days for an interview with him, agreeing to see me from the outset, but without setting a day or time. I had the feeling he wanted to tire out the curious and gauge my real interest, as he did with his patients

Those days seemed very long: there was nothing to do but wait, in a context where no one could communicate with me. Undoubtedly, this reserve was partly due to the fact that I'm a doctor, and that many physicians and other scientists had already approached him to try and extract some secret from his treatment, notably the botanical composition of his potion. The potion is said to combine emetic, laxative and psychotropic properties (some suggest that it contains psychoactive datura seeds, without specifying the source of their information). But Phra Chamroon had decided from the outset to maintain total secrecy. The most frequently cited reason was the need to avoid commercialization of the plant mixture, and to allow someone to benefit financially from the ancestral knowledge made available here free of charge to the less fortunate. Phra Chamroon also sometimes presented it from this angle, evoking the possibility of misuse of the potion. However, when he says: “those who help me in the composition of the purge do not know the exact formula”, we understand that he is referring to another dimension of the preparation and not

specifically to a question of dosage or methodology in the preparation of the potion. And he confirmed this for us personally, saying:

“If I give you the preparation and you analyze it scientifically, you'll find, for example, 9 active principles, but the tenth will escape you because it's invisible, IT'S THE SPIRIT.”

When Phra Chamroon realized that my intention was not exactly “technical” but rather to try and capture some of the essence of his approach to the problem of addiction, he graciously acceded to my request. He considers that what he does in Thailand could very well be applied in other countries with obvious cultural adaptations, since plants are not the fundamental element of his methodology if not the spiritual evolution of those dedicated to healing. Spirit has no borders and is not the property of any religion. Consequently, he says he is ready to pass on some of his wisdom to anyone who is truly ready to receive it with respect. He thus says:

"I am ready to give to those who wish to receive. But the voices that ask for my help are too weak. They are not heard." And in the face of the multiple criticisms he receives on various fronts, he justifies his stubborn pursuit of healing based on true, noble Buddhist compassion: “It's only by looking at the drug addicts who come that I know I must go on.”

Phra Chamroon guided me to *sajja*, pronounced in Thai:

*"I believe there is a power beyond and transcending me. I believe there are good and bad deeds, good and bad thoughts, good and bad words. I believe in the virtue of accumulating good deeds, thoughts and words. I wish to approach this power for the benefit of others."*

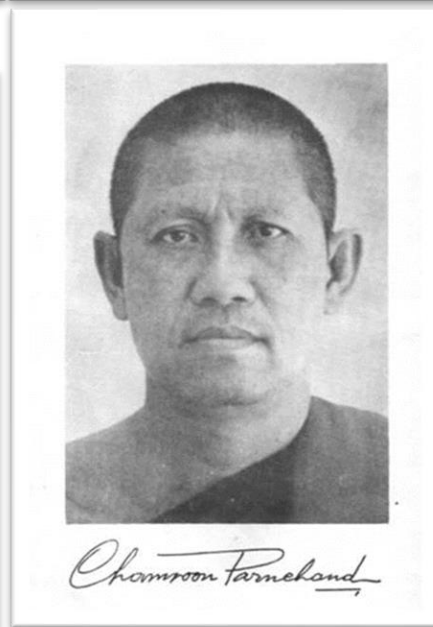
He advised me, interpreting my dreams during my stay:

"Accumulate good deeds, you will always be stronger and stronger. You have to be stronger than the addict to help him. Your deeds are past, present and future: they remain. If you give someone a glass of water, you must first hold it in your hands. Meditate, concentrate, every moment. All the time you spend meditating is not time wasted. Act according to your deepest nature” - And he ended with this promise: ‘I'll teach you in your dreams, even in English...’ He kept his promise. It made me realize that it's good men who build the world, and that goodness is a manly force, different from overflowing, weak sentimentality, and that actions speak louder than words.

Now and then, I remember the monk sitting at the entrance to Tham Krabok on his heap of stones, breaking them with that Asian patience, that serenity of an appeased Buddha. Just imagining him calms me, as if he had in his hands the strength to break the hardest of things, as if the spirit he manifests in his humble work could break any heart of stone, the most resistant to love. It seems to me that he possesses something of eternity and that, as if by magic, while I'm busy in my daily life, he, with the security of those who already know, in a steady and sure gesture, with each blow of his hammer, continues to dissolve and melt the most bitter knots in the lives of others. I believe that this mysterious force he embodies whispers something about the Spirit.

**Chamroon Parnchand (1926-1999)**

Chamroon was born on April 1, 1926 in Lopburi and died in 1999. He was ordained a monk on July 19, 1953. He was the eldest of seven children born to Chamlong Parnchand, a moh yapanburan (practitioner of traditional herbal medicine) and Liam Macharoen. At the age of seven, he was sent to live with his uncle Sook Parnchand, who ran a medicinal plant shop in the Klong Toey district of Bangkok. His aunt, Mian, a Buddhist lay nun (there is no official Buddhist order of nuns), had earned the deference accorded to monks and the title of Luang Poh Yai (reverend elder father) through her holiness and prophetic powers.



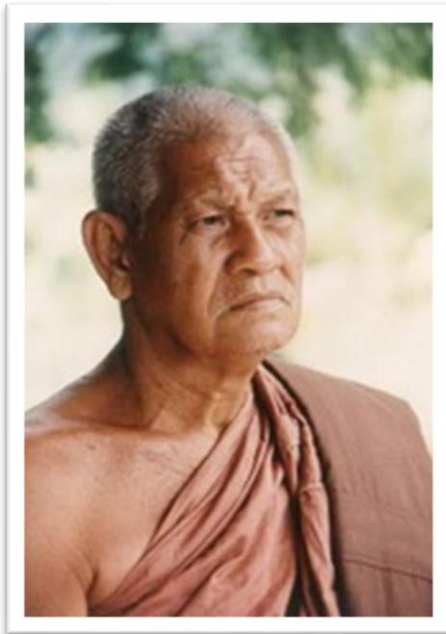
**Charoen Parnchand (1929-2008)**

Chamroon's younger brother, he was ordained a monk at the age of 20 and then joined his older brother at Thjam Krabok. When Chamroon died, he succeeded him as Abbot of the monastery.

Luang Paw Charoen was a highly creative man: a gifted artist and musician, he also invented remedies as a researcher and scientist. His knowledge of rocks and stones was astounding. He called his garden his "Open University", where he conducted research and welcomed his disciples, monks and lay people from all walks of life, who came to him for advice and instruction.

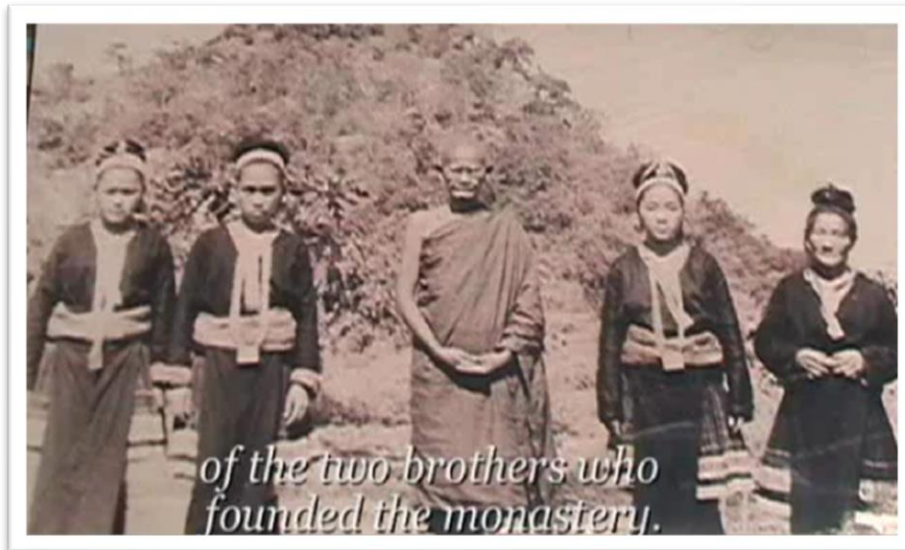
He distributed his products generously, protected people in danger and, thanks to his extraordinary powers, kept Thamkrabok a safe place.

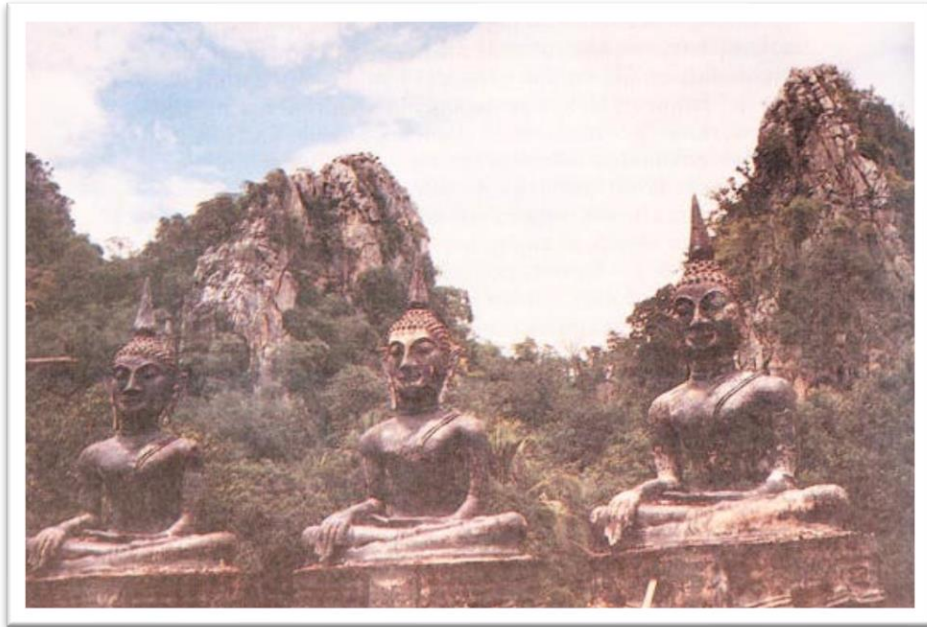
One of Luang Paw Charoen's experiments involved creating music based on natural forms. Cracks in walls, stones or the ground are copied onto sheets of plastic and then transformed into musical notes. These melodies became the raw material for musical compositions.



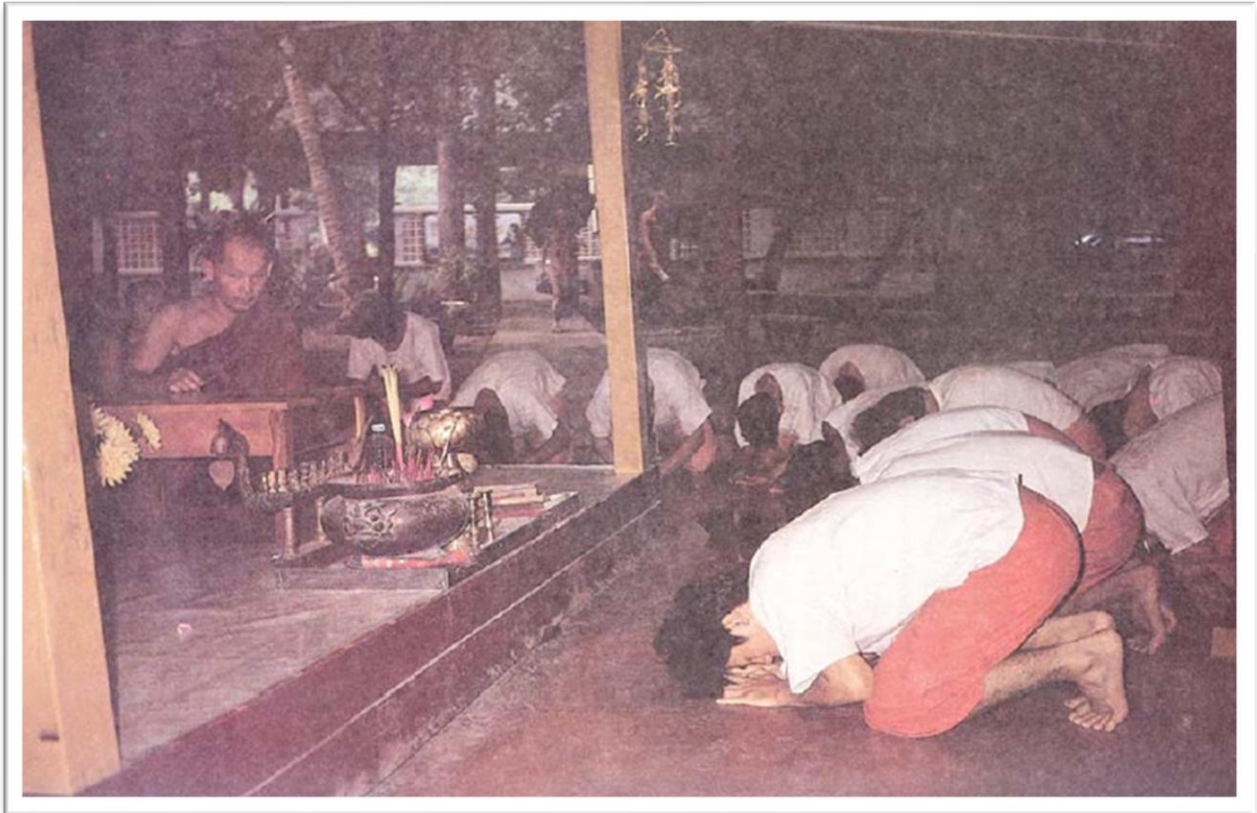
**Luang Poh Yaai**

Mian, Chamroom's aunt, was a Buddhist lay mystic whose holiness and prophetic and supernatural powers earned her the deference accorded to monks and the title of Luang Poh Yai (reverend elder father). She served as his guide and spiritual master until his death in 1970.

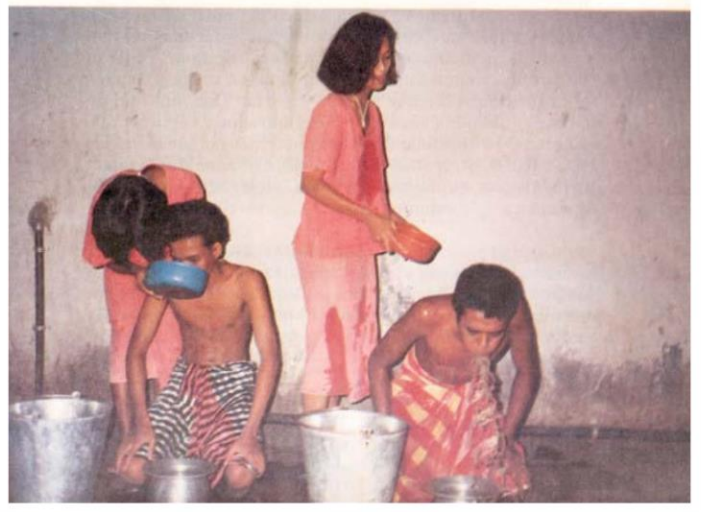
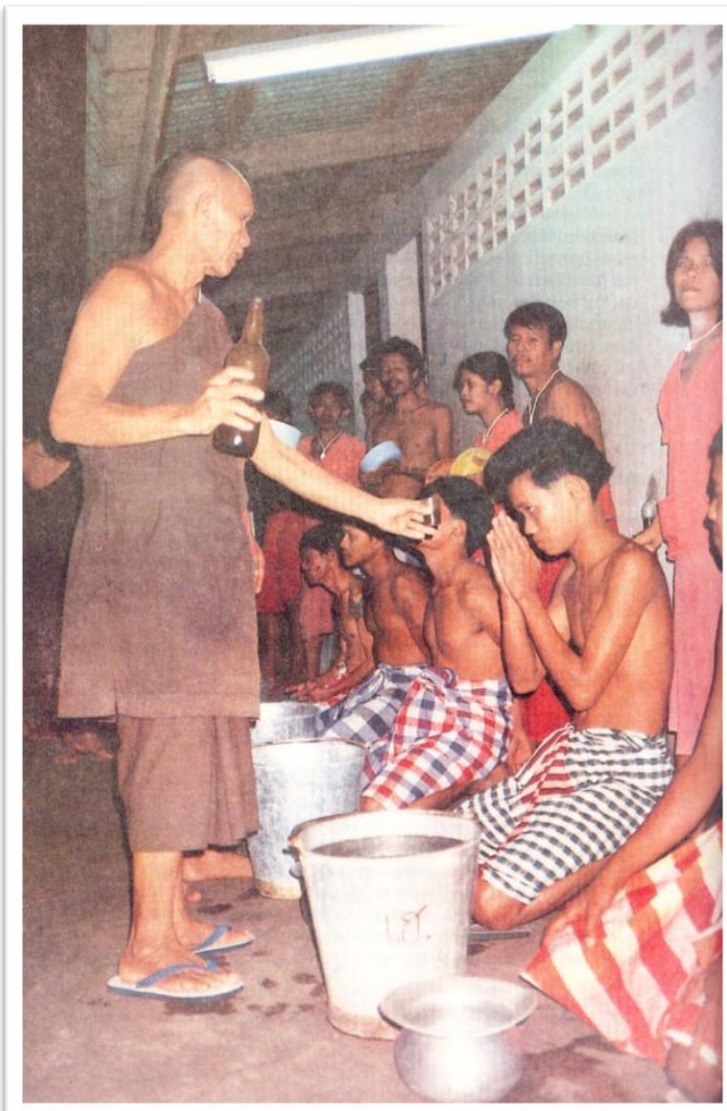




Buddha images inside the Monastery. Behind them are the hills of Prong Prab, where the “Bamboo Caves” are located (Photo: TAKIWASI).



Inmates taking the SAJJA or vow to give up drugs forever before the image of Buddha (Photo: TAKIWASI).



Patients taking Yotak during the detoxification phase (Photos: TAKIWASI).