



The Golden Horse Monastery

Phra Kru Ba Neua Chai - Farmer, Fighter, Soldier, Monk.

By Alan Surrey

Photographs by John Hulme

He is both revered and feared. Phra Kru Ba Neua Chai quietly withdrew from a successful career as a Muay Thai fighter to ordain as a Buddhist Monk in 1992. He founded 'Wat Maa Tong', The Golden Horse Monastery near the northern Thai-Burmese border after experiencing a powerful vision. He is revered for his work with the novice monks at the Monastery, many of whom are orphans, suffering from addiction or were abandoned by poverty stricken families – He is feared by those who seek to profit from narcotics trafficking in Thailand's once notorious Golden Triangle.



Kru Ba grew up near Chang Rai, the sixth and only surviving child of parents who farmed and raised chickens. His given family name was Samer Jaipinta. As a child, Kru Ba was ill-at-ease with the family's source of

income. Frustrated by his son's ongoing attempts to release the birds from captivity before they were butchered, his father made him responsible for raising the family's fighting cocks. The birds always won, earning Samer precious income and release from the daily chores of slaughter. He learnt a lot from the majestic fighting birds. 'Like these creatures, we all have to fight - for freedom, independence, to be who we want to be. They are the best boxing masters one could have. They have no tools, you learn a lot just by observing how they move.'

When he was thirteen he began his training in Muay Thai. At fourteen he turned professional. To his fans he was known as Samerchai. His career continued while serving in the Thai military and spanned fifteen years. It was while training for a world title fight that he chose to ordain as a monk. He had only been defeated three times.

The novice monks are all taught the 184 traditional techniques of Muay Thai. Kru Ba is a master and still practices every day. "Boxing for me is meditating. It helps me find peace and stillness." Of the 33,000 monasteries in Thailand, The Golden Horse Temple is the only one that trains novice

monks in Muay Thai. Inevitably this has led to controversy. In his defense Kru Ba states "I have no weapons and I come in peace, but this gives the children a skill and builds their self esteem and provides them with a sense of security."

Only two foreigners, both American have sought out Kru Ba as a teacher in Muay Thai. The first quit after five days. Antonio Graceffo an ex GI arrived fresh from the famed Shoaling Temple and spent two months training under the tutelage of Kru Ba. "Studying with Kru Ba was one of the hardest things I have ever done" he remembers.

The novice monks are subject to the same rigorous discipline. Their day begins at 4am. They meditate until daybreak when the demanding routine of the day begins.

Many have come from ethnic Hill tribes such as the Lahu, Karen, Yao, Akha and Lua. They are taught the Buddhist scriptures, Thai, crop cultivation, animal husbandry and to raise income for the Monastery, they manufacture bricks which are purchased by a local construction company.



Perhaps most notably, they are taught equestrian skills. Because of the monastery's remote location, the Monks cannot go out every morning on the traditional alms round. The problem was solved when a devotee won the lottery and donated a Thai horse that had been saved from slaughter. The gesture was quickly repeated and the Monastery now

cares for over 60 horses. Each novice is tasked with feeding, grooming and riding their own horse creating bonds of friendship and mutual respect.

Kru Ba and the novices travel to local communities twice a week before first light mounted on horseback to collect alms, teach the Dharma and warn of the dangers of Yaba (amphetamines) opium and heroin.



Crop substitution programmes, a measure introduced to eradicate the cultivation of the opium poppy have not always met with the resounding success once hoped for. The opium poppy grows naturally in the wild. To grow coffee or vegetables successfully on a commercial scale requires sophisticated knowledge of agriculture. Hardship is the norm. Kru Ba has built up a relationship of trust with these outlying, rural communities where Thai military patrols were once met with suspicion and hostility.

Kru Ba's tough stand against the drug cartels has nearly cost him his life on more than one occasion. The walls of his Kut are pitted with bullet holes. He has survived poisoning through the power of meditation and a botched assassination attempt when the weapons of the two gunmen fortuitously jammed. He believes he has been spared an early death because he has not yet completed his mission in life.

If you google Kru Ba you will find literally, thousands of references. From a humble, solitary beginning at the sacred site of the abandoned

monastery Kru Ba has achieved international recognition for his work at Wat Maa Tong. Most notably perhaps in a documentary film titled 'Buddha's Lost Children' which received acclaim and prestigious awards at no less than seven International Film Festivals.

This kind of notoriety is common with Thai Buddhist Monks. The Venerable Acariya Mun, Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sod are just a few. Ajahn Brahm, a Theravada Monk now based in Perth, Western Australia is another. His Friday night Dharma talks, interspersed with humorous anecdotes are viewed by thousands each week on YouTube.

Ajahn Brahmali a Theravada Monk also based in Perth recently gave a talk on 'Gurus,' and the corruptive influence of celebrity, even in Buddhism. He commented that the Buddha himself was famous. If some one is a good teacher, widely respected for their wisdom, fame is a natural phenomenon. "The danger is

not in becoming famous but how you relate to that fame." When Phra Kru Ba ordained, several monks spent four days and nights tattooing his body with the Buddhist scriptures to serve as a constant reminder of his sacred vows.

Even though his days as a Muay Thai fighter in the ring have long since passed, he states "Before I was just a soldier of Thailand. Now I am a soldier of all the world's people. Now, I fight against lies, theft, hate and violence." For Kru Ba, the fight continues regardless of his new found celebrity status.

