

COLD Turkey in a HOT Climate:

Detox Treatment at Tham Krabok

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A year after I'd made a vow to myself to stop drinking, I saw a poster for East-West Detox (EWD). EWD apparently took addicts from the UK to a temple in Thailand to undergo an herbal treatment for addictions. I remember wishing that I had been aware of the monastery in Thailand before I'd made my own vow. By a quirk of fate, a few years later my wife, Jo, was asked to become a trustee of EWD, and through her I quickly became engrossed in the organization.

I arranged my first visit to Tham Krabok in 1998 and was very fortunate to be able to engage with the first abbot, Luangpor Chamroon Pamchand, before his untimely death. This initial visit was my introduction to the monastery's treatment regime, in particular the use of *Sajja*, a sacred vow never to use narcotics and/or alcohol again. My own homemade vow taken in my kitchen and the sacred vow of Tham Krabok *Sajja* were strikingly similar—not in terms of words or form but in their absolute commitment to abstinence.

In 2003, I ordained for twenty-nine days as a novice Tham Krabok monk and spent much of that time working with drug addicts and alcoholics in "The Hey," the monastery's treatment compound. I keep in regular contact with the monastery and visit at least once every year. I look forward to the herbal steam baths, evening chanting, Dhamma talks and formal meditation practice. I even take a dose or two of the notorious herbal medicine to "refresh" my *Sajja* in one of the most exclusive "health spas" in the world.

The original treatment process was devised by Luangpor Chamroon and his aunt Mian. The program has evolved over many years since the first addict was treated in 1959 into a highly effective, systematic regime. Treatment at Tham Krabok is not only a unique experience; it's also an unrepeatable one, perceived by many addicts as a last chance. As I was told by one of the monks, "No second chances at detox are possible. Tham Krabok is not a clinic with a revolving door."

There are perhaps five main identifiable elements that work on two complementary levels: the spiritual and the physical.

First is the location and relative isolation of the monastery, the removal of addicts from their usual environment—a separation from home, family and all that is familiar. Once accepted for treatment, addicts must hand over all of their belongings, including their passport, and exchange their clothes for a uniform consisting of a white T-shirt and loose red trousers. After five days, the white T-shirt is exchanged for a red one, indicating that the addict has completed the crucial vomiting treatment. Voluntarily giving up one's clothes and possessions is an act of surrender, perhaps the first essential act of letting go. The uniform and lack of possessions doesn't stop some addicts from running away, but it does deter most of them!

Second is the vow and the mantra. *Sajja* is a Pali word found in Buddhist texts; it has the broad meaning of embracing truth, loyalty, purity and honesty, as in "The Four Noble Sattvas." As well as in this broader sense, the Tham Krabok community uses individual *Sattvas*, or



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vows, not only as a key component of the detox treatment but also in their day-to-day approach to Buddhist practice. It does not matter whether you take a Sajja not to use drugs for life or a Sajja not to be angry for seven hours. What is important is to see this commitment through to the end.

The Sajja not to use drugs is considered to be the most important part of the detox and recovery process. The ritual drug and alcohol Sajjas are presided over by senior monks, who recite the words of the vow, with the addict repeating the words line by line as best he can. Taking this vow in the presence of "high" monk gives a greater sense of personal obligation. Bowing before a "mystical" ally can also be considered an act of trust and surrender.

After five days of treatment, an addict may request a personal Sajja to help with his recovery. This may be as simple as "I will honor my parents," and it may even be time-limited. At the time of taking this personal Sajja, the addict is given a piece of paper on which is written a unique mantra, called a "*Kahtah*," known only to him or her. The *Kahtah* can be used as an object of meditation or as a blessing for food, but most importantly it is for use in times of high stress or temptation. After seven days the paper is swallowed by the recovering addict. Now the addict really does embody his Sajja and *Kahtah*!

The third critical success factor is peer support. Regardless of the addicts' social status outside the monastery, Tham Krabok offers them its accommodation and services for free; they pay only a small amount for food and sundries. All addicts wear the same uniform, and everyone is treated the same. Addicts in their first days of treatment are helped, supported and encouraged by those who have already completed the critical five-day vomiting treatment.

In the past, there was little or no support for addicts after leaving Tham Krabok, but in 2003 I sowed the seeds of an online community called Friends of Tham Krabok Monastery. The group provides ongoing mutual support and a no-holds-barred answering service to questions from addicts considering treatment at Tham Krabok. Last year I arranged an exclusive retreat for Thamkrabokers, facilitated by Martine Batchelor at The Barn Buddhist Retreat Centre in Devon, UK. In May 2010 there will be another retreat at The Barn with Kevin Griffin as guest teacher. This year will also see the opening of a new sixty-bed residential after-care facility for ex-Tham Krabok addicts in Chiang Rai, northern Thailand. Likewise, the Refuge Farm project is being built and funded by a grateful ex-addict from Belgium.

The fourth factor of success is meditation and Dhamma talks. Tham Krabok practices a unique approach to Buddhism, and for most addicts the monastery is their first introduction to Buddhism in any form. Weekly Dhamma talks are given by one of the high monks, together with opportunities to learn Tham Krabok-style and traditional sitting and walking meditation techniques. Addicts in treatment sweep up leaves from around the monastery twice a day; some, but not all, see and appreciate this as a type of work meditation. It maybe only anecdotal, but I see those addicts who accept sweeping leaves without complaint as the ones who find long-lasting recovery. A lot of addicts leave Tham Krabok with the rudimentary beginnings of meditation practice.

The final factor is the infamous aspect of the Tham Krabok program: "It's that monastery in Thailand where they make you vomit". That maybe so, but there is a lot more to this purging than just emptying the stomach. The herbal "medicine" was developed over a number of years. It is said that the recipe of 109 natural ingredients is known only to the current abbot and the herbalist monk. The concoction is emetic, often producing "projectile vomiting." This part of the treatment has many important components, including the ritual dispensing of the thick brown liquid, the real and symbolic cleansing, the physical effect of purging toxins from the body, and the resulting physical weakness. This public display of vomiting is another act of letting go—on a very physical level. In addition to the emetic detox mixture, addicts are dispensed purgative herbal pills and encouraged to drink a special herbal tea, particularly before and during the daily visits to one of the three herbal steam saunas. Make no mistake; this is a very real and very rapid detox.

So Tham Krabok gets addicts physically clean, gives them a simple rule for staying clean (the Sajja), and offers a simple tool for relapse prevention (the *Kahtah*). The rest is up to the addict.

Because the personal commitment to abstinence is so central to the Tham Krabok process, addicts who are coerced to go to the monastery or who are misled into seeking a wonder cure are the ones who most often lack the mind-set or inner strength to maintain their Sajja. After leaving Tham Krabok, many of them relapse; some of them die.

Tham Krabok does not offer a miracle cure. It is better likened to cold turkey in a hot climate. It's uncomfortable and it's tough. It's certainly not junkies in sunglasses on deck chairs. For those willing to change their habits and their outlook, there is a good chance that Sajja will work for them, but it would be unwise and unfair to point an airplane full of addicts to Tham Krabok. It just wouldn't work.

When we stop taking our drug(s) of choice, we most often find that we are lacking in ethics, or morally bankrupt. We are without any real or whole sense of

integrity or goodness. In most instances we cannot see this, just as we couldn't see our original addiction(s). We have spent too many years lying, cheating, stealing, abusing and even prostituting ourselves, so when we get clean, we simply do not know how to behave properly. The Tham Krabok Sajja is not simply a vow to stop taking intoxicating substances; it is a commitment to start a new life, embracing truth and honesty. Effectively, we must radically change our view of the world and our view of ourselves in that world.

Treatment at Tham Krabok is sometimes described as a hero's journey. One monk told me: "Don't forget one thing: the hero is not made in those proud hours after victory but in the long, desperate and hellish hours as he passes through darkness without giving up!" -

ABOUT THE AUTHOR *Vince Cullen* is a recovering alcoholic who has been associated with Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand and Buddhist-oriented drug and alcohol recovery since 1998. He lives in England, where he has recently started a Fifth Precept meditation group (see www.5th-precept.org).

ABOUT THE ARTIST *Ma Deva Padma* (Susan Morgan Ostapkoewicz) is an artist and writer. She is the author of TAO Oracle: An Illuminated New Approach to the I Ching and the best-selling Osho Zen Tarot, which has been translated into eighteen languages. Both decks (by St. Martin's Press) are richly illustrated and attract people the world over to meditation. Padma lives with her husband, Ashika, at their Embrace of Heaven and Earth Studio in the mountains north of Melbourne, Australia. More of Padma's art can be seen on pages 26-27 and at www.embraceart.com.

RECOVERY RESOURCES

Following are websites for some of the resources mentioned in this issue. These sites include links to many other Buddhist-related recovery resources.

Buddhist Recovery Network: www.buddhistrecovery.org

The Center for Mindful Eating: www.tcme.org

Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention: <http://depts.washington.edu/abrc/MBRP>

Tham Krabok: www.thamkrabok-monastery.org

Friends of Tham Krabok:

<http://groups.google.com/group/Friends-of-Thamkrabok-Monastery>

Meditation for Recovery: www.5th-precept.org

Recovery Retreats: www.HungryGhostRetreats.org

One Breath at a Time/Kevin Griffin: www.kevingriffin.net