

The Cave of Healing: The Physical /Spiritual Detoxification and The Distinctive Healing Program for Drug Rehabilitation at Thamkrabok Monastery, Thailand

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Abstract

This research paper provides a comprehensive case study research of the relevance of the principles and practices of Buddhism in the field of drug and alcohol healing. Wat Thamkrabok, a Buddhist monastery in Thailand, is selected as it is cited of conducting the world-famous drug and alcoholic rehabilitation program. Based on Buddhist techniques and beliefs, the Thamkrabok healing program is extremely distinctive from other healing treatments. This paper first presents a brief story of Thamkrabok monastery and requirements for the addicts to entering to the rehabilitation program. It next focuses on the healing techniques employed in the program: physical and spiritual detoxification. The paper ends with the analysis on the distinctive characteristics of the Thamkrabok rehabilitation scheme in which its unique therapeutic elements would prove effective in rehabilitation programs elsewhere.

Key Words: Buddhism and Drug Rehabilitation; Buddhism and Health; Thamkrabok Detoxification Program; Thamkrabok Monastery

Introduction

Many contemporary practitioners recognise the value and utility of techniques and approaches found in religious and spiritual traditions in the context of rehabilitation and healing (Mikulas, 1983). Many see the realm of healing as a broad field, into which ideas and practices from different sources can and should be incorporated as necessary. Buddhism has been used particularly widely in this way. Several present-day remedy settings have used Buddhist techniques and ideas, and the reports available suggest a positive and fruitful outcome. Since Buddhism espouses the notion of a productive and healthy lay life, it offers ways not only of dealing with problems and difficulties, but also of improving spiritual well-being in general.

We thus intend to study a comprehensive case of the relevance of the principles and practices of Buddhism in the field of drug and alcohol healing. Wat Thamkrabok, a Buddhist monastery in Thailand is selected to be our case study research as it is cited of conducting the world-famous drug and alcoholic rehabilitation program. We aim to give the story behind the program result by capturing what happened to bring it about. This can be a good opportunity to highlight a program's success and to bring attention to a particular characteristic in the rehabilitation program. We found that the Thamkrabok program is based on Buddhist teachings and is known for its use of unconventional methods to treat addictions. These include herbal medicines which induce vomiting in order to alleviate the craving for substances, herbal saunas, a supportive but strict disciplined environment under the care and control of monks, an emphasis on Buddhism, and a sacred vow (*sajja*) to the Buddha to forever quit addictive drugs.

Approach to the Case Study

We collected data from multiple sources of information and methods to provide as complete a picture as possible. Starting with the monitoring visit in June 2011 at Thamkrabok Monastery located in the mountains approximately one hundred and thirty kilometres north from the city of Bangkok, between Saraburi and Phraputthabat, on the way to Lopburi. After

the first visit, during July and September 2011 we collected data by reviewing relevant information, obtaining additional information about the program from monastery staff and ex-drug addicts, and employing observation and in-depth interviews with program staff and participants. The descriptions of the Thamkrabok program in this case study report are not intended to reiterate or confirm information about the program that is available through other documentation and sources. Rather, the descriptions we provide are meant to offer a more complete picture of what happened in the program and why, to highlight the program's success, and to bring life the distinctive principles and practices of Buddhism in the field of drug and alcohol healing.

A Brief Story of Thamkrabok Monastery

The Thamkrabok Monastery was discovered in 1956 by Luangpaw Charoen Panchand, who was at that time a young monk on a pilgrimage. The monastery started to develop the drug detoxification program in 1959. The meaning of Tham (falling tone) means in Thai, "cave". Krabok (low tones) is a creation of the abbot, Luangpaw Charoen: "Kra ja bawk" means "to have something to say". The name of the monastery could thus be translated as "Cave of the Teaching". Also, the abbot, once called Thamkrabok as "an airport to Nirvana" (Thamkrabok monastery, 2011).

Over a period of 40 years, the monastery has been offering detoxification and rehabilitation to those addicted to harmful substances more than 150,000 patients from both Thais and foreigners around the world with minimal payment or reward as part of the goodwill of the Monastery in supporting its people. Significantly, in 1975 the Abbot of Thamkrabok was presented with the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service, by which time he had already treated 57,000 addicts and which is considered to be an "achievement of worldwide significance". This greatly added to the popularity of the program. Furthermore, it has been said that the "Thamkrabok Monastery in Thailand runs the toughest drug rehabilitation regime in the world" (TARA Detox Organisation, 2011).

The program is administered by the monk and ex-addict assistants. There are about 300 monks living at Thamkrabok monastery, of which half

are ex-addicts. The rules of the program are strictly enforced. It consists of the following: a) complete abstinence from drugs causing dependence, b) obedience to the monk, c) refrain from any disruptive behaviour, and d) remain within the compound of the temple through the admission period without any excuse.

There is no cost to attend the program as it relies on donations for support. It costs less than US\$3 per day to feed and house each participant. Participants are given 20 baht (55 cents) worth of coupons per day to buy personal supplies. However, foreigners who accept referral packages from representatives abroad must pay for referral, insurance, travel, medical, accommodation, meals treatment, and other services (see www.tara-detox.org, www.alba-thai.org, www.thamkrabok.org.au, www.east-westdetox.org.uk).

The Thamkrabok rehabilitation program has been in operation since 1959. Admission statistics revealed that over the past decades there have been between 4,000 and 5,000 annual intakes, which correspond to between 300 and 400 per month. The majority of admissions were Thai young males (91%), mostly aged in their twenties and late teens. Thai females (7%) were under-represented in comparison with national statistics which have shown that approximately 20% of treatment admission are female. Also, there were about 5% of the foreigners (Thamkrabok monastery, 2011).

The administrative staffs do follow-up surveys by mailing out card to addicts or their relatives, or in some cases by sending representatives of the monastery to visit village headmen during the third to twelfth month after release. Their findings have shown that approximately 70 percent are living drug and alcohol-free and that 25 percent have returned to addiction; the remaining 5 percent are not found (Yogachandra, 1978 cited by The Asia-Pacific NGO on Drug and Substance Abuse Prevention, 2005).

Requirements for Admission to the Program

In order to entering to the program, addicts have to be interviewed to determine whether they are coming under voluntary motivation and whether they are physically able to undergo the treatment program. Applicants who

are ill or who have not come of their self-determination will not be admitted. The friend or family member who brought them to the monastery signs those accepted into the program. During their stay at the treatment program, only that person (or one of four others, whose names are listed) will be permitted to pay a weekly visit. Also, upon completing the program, the same person who signed them in must sign them out, and in some cases, addicts are required to stay for an additional length of time at the request of family members.

The finality of their decision is further reinforced by informing them that they can only attend the course one time in their lives. In the evening of the first day, after sunset, the new patients are taken to an open shrine where they make the vow in front of the image of the Buddha and in the presence of a monk. Those who are not Buddhist may make the pledge according to their own beliefs. After following this ceremony, the addict attends his/her first physical healing session.

The Healing Program: Physical and Spiritual Detoxification

Drug detoxification means two things: a) to withdraw the poisons from one's body and b) to withdraw one's soul from the ghetto of darkness. This process starts as soon as one stops nourishing darkness with thought, speech, language and bodily actions and as soon as one begins to nourish what is good and light, with thoughts, speech, language and bodily actions.

The alcohol and drug-treatment thus basically requires four components: 1) the total detoxification of the body, 2) the mental confrontation with oneself and one's situation, which can lead to fundamental life changes, 3) strategies to construct one's motivation, and 4) the insight, that the search and the realisation of one's life-task will be a long-term effort. In order to live a satisfying life, it needs more than a struggle against (drugs); it needs a positive aspiration. At the moment that one has found one's constructive life-task, as well as the motivation to realise it, alcohols and/or drugs no longer be necessary.

We found that the healing program at Wat Thamkrabok for alcohol and drug addicts is divided into two complementary components: *physical*

and *spiritual detoxification*. The physical element is the painful part of the treatment. It basically involves quitting the drug habit called “cold-turkey,” which is stopping drugs abruptly with no substitute offered to aid in the withdrawal. The spiritual side involves taking a vow or *sajja* never to touch narcotics again.

The Physical Detoxification

The program is perhaps best known for its use of vomiting in order to relieve the “craving” for alcohols and drugs. It requires the following elements:

The Strong Herbal Medicine and Vomiting which Luang Paw Yaai, the holy man of Thamkrabok, has developed the rather disgusting, yet very effective potion. The herbal preparation comes from herbs gathered in the vicinity and some from Chiang Rai, Thailand. The dose of herbal liquid is given to patients everyday for five days. This dark strong smelling herbal mixture is taken with large quantity of water which induces profound vomiting. It is explained that severe vomiting is the therapeutic as it causes physical weakness which “renders good sleep” (Thamkrabok monastery, 2011). Besides, peers of patients also provide moral support by cheering and singing spiritual songs. Program participants who had completed the detoxification phase stood around and chanted slogans to encourage and assist the newcomers. There seemed to be an impression of excitement and a strong expectation that the newcomer do a thorough job of vomiting. This peer support and encouragement appears to be a significant component of the ritual.

The Black Herbal Pills are another element of purification. According to the constitution of the patient, the tablets produce an energising or a relaxing effect. During the detox-process, no other kind of medicine is allowed because it would disturb the procedure of detoxification.

The Tea and the Herbal Saunas are given every afternoon in order to reduce pain in the muscles and bones and to induce relaxation. The tea has a purifying effect and can be taken throughout the day. Similar to the vomiting, the herbal sauna is a classical element of physical purification.

The green herbs that are added to the steam are exceptionally good for the skin, the lungs and the eyes.

The Spiritual Detoxification

“Spiritual treatment” is the primary approach to rehabilitation, and patients must make a vow (*sajja*) of lifetime abstinence from drugs and alcohols during a religious ceremony held on the very first evening of their stay. A warning is given for those who fail: “If breaks this vow, the spirits will punish him” (Thamkrabok monastery, 2011). According to Luangpaw Charoen, (Abbot of Thamkrabok Monastery), the physical detoxification is only 5 percent of the treatment as he stated that:

“You must do the remaining 95 percent of the work in your mind and through your actions” (TARA Detox Organisation, 2011; Thamkrabok monastery, 2011).

Therefore, the mental detoxification is created as a principal healing aspect of the program, which consists of two essential elements: Sajja; and Kahtah.

“*Sajja*” is a Pali word found in Buddhist texts which has the broad meaning of embracing truth, loyalty, purity and honesty. It is a solemn declaration about the active fulfilment of a truth. All addicts agree that Sajja is the most effective part of the treatment but the most difficult as the patients have to keep it for the rest of their lives. Addicts volunteering for treatment at the monastery, which now has some 100 monks in residence, take Sajja, a sacred vow, never to touch drugs again and commit themselves to a new life.

The Sajja is a sacred act that if the patients believe, it will connect them with their will power and with something “beyond” as the abbot Luangpaw Charoen has called “the whisper of God” (Thamkrabok monastery, 2011). Significantly, breaking a sajja is considered a very serious thing. There is the belief that those break sajja will have to bare unpleasant consequences in their lives. Therefore, the advance notice is given for addicts to consider before deciding to take Sajja.

The ceremony will be conducted by patients who light three incense sticks, put the sticks into the bowl, then they fold their hands and repeat the formula the high monk speaks:

“I cordially render my worship - physically, verbally and spiritually - towards **Our Lord Buddha**, His Teachings and towards all His Disciples. May the Teachings of **Our Lord Buddha** bring these sacred vows towards the **true Nirvana**.

I hereby solemnly promise to commit my vows to **Our Lord Buddha** and pledge, for the rest of my life, commencing from today, that;

I will never again allow myself to become addicted,

I will not enter the trade or be in the possession of dangerous drugs,

I will never again use or add any addictive substance or solvents-namely; opium, heroin, morphine, cocaine, crack-cocaine, marijuana, hallucinogenic drugs (such as LSD - lysergic acid), amphetamines (such as “Speed” or “Ecstasy”) - to any non-toxic substances, solvents, food or drinks.

I will not urge other people to use addictive drugs.

I call upon the earth, the sky, and the air to be my witnesses.

May **Our Lord Buddha**, all of those present and all those who can hear our vows be my witness.

May **the Teachings of Our Lord Buddha** grant the merits gained to the Beings in the universe, living or dead, and to the father, the mother, the benefactors, the patrons and “Chao kam nai wane”.

Please help me to acquire the **four Noble Truths of Buddhism**, the **four Perceptions of Buddhism**, the **four Orders of Merit of Buddhism**, and to attempt the demanding route towards **Nirvana**”

Source:www.alba-thai.org

“**Kahtah**” is a tool for raising one’s determination. Even though its syllables have no intellectual meaning, its function is purely energetic. The

patients will receive a little paper with a ‘sacred word’ after the first phase of their treatment. The patients learn “kahtah” by heart, then eat the paper after 7 days and state it constantly when perform meditation, when endurance and strength are needed, or in moments of craving and temptation. It has been believed that saying the “kahtah” can also be a very powerful strategy for helping people acquire the things that they desire.

Besides, *Meditation, traditional Thai massage, chanting, working and medical cares* are the further options of the detoxification program.

After the first five days of detoxification, the second five days are referred to as the “recovery phase”. In this phase, the patient is permitted to rest and recover from physical exhaustion. They are circulated from the locked detoxification ward to more comfortable quarters and are free to wander. During this phase, the monks teach Buddhist doctrines and encourage participants to share and reflect upon their experiences. At the conclusion of the 10-day program, the participants reaffirm their vows to abstain from alcohols, after which they are free to leave (unless they have contracted for a longer stay). It is recommended that most youth alcohol addicts stay beyond the 10-day basic program for periods of one to six months during which they pursue vocational or religious training. In addition, they are expected to do work assignments which are given out each day by the monks. Some patients chose to be ordained as monks and stay on permanently to further the work of the monastery.

The Distinctive Treatments of Thamkrabok Healing Program

The rehabilitation scheme at Thamkrabok monastery is an indigenous program based on Thai culture and Buddhism. It raises some interesting issues for discussion concerning treatment for addictions. There are some similarities with traditional programs. For instance, the detoxification procedure resembles the “cold turkey” approach seen in other countries, where addicts are locked in cells to suffer through the pains of withdrawal (The Asia-Pacific NGO on Drug and Substance Abuse Prevention, 2005). Additionally, therapeutic communities in some countries practice the employment of project graduates to stay on as staff and the emphasis on

discipline. There are various characteristics, however, which are extremely distinctive from other healing treatments; these include the role of Buddhism in healing, purging and herbal sauna used during detoxification, shock and discipline, and the sacred vow. The details of each treatment are presented here:

The Role of Buddhism in Healing

The goal of Buddhism is to overcome suffering by means of the Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of three principle parts: morality (*sila*), concentration (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*prajna*) (Buswell, 2004). It advocates a middle way between the two extremes of constant attachment to sensual pleasure and self-mortification. Attachment (grasping of an object) is distinguished from craving (aspiring to an object not yet reached). Both are opposed to contentment and lead to suffering. In this view, addiction can be understood as an excessive attachment to and craving for drugs which provide sensual pleasure.

The Buddhist treatment approach focuses on both morality and understanding. The moral teaching is that addiction to intoxicants is wrong as it leads to suffering, neglect of family, heedlessness, danger, squandering of wealth and so forth. Addicts must be taught about the wrongfulness of addiction and its consequences, and change their behaviours accordingly. It can be seen that there is an explicit emphasis at Thamkrabok monastery on the morality of addiction. This is first apparent during the sacred vow where the addict acknowledges the wrong fullness of his/her actions and makes a *sajja* to live without drugs and alcohols. According to the abbot, the pain and suffering of the vomiting procedure has punishment and chastening as part of its intended effects (The Asia-Pacific NGO on Drug and Substance Abuse Prevention, 2005). The strict discipline, the teaching of the monks, and emphasis on responsibility for one's actions could also be thought of as moral condition. Simultaneously, understanding must be developed through meditation, with its two aspects of concentration (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*prajna*). Meditation is available at the Thamkrabok for Thais who are willing to stay for longer period and for foreigners, but it would depend

on whether there are monks available who can speak English (or other foreign languages). In addition to formal meditation learning, the Buddhist philosophy and way of life is transmitted through the example of the monks. Several monks have recovered from addiction through the practice of Buddhism. The abbot, Luangpaw Chamroon Parnchand, is regarded as a holy man, and his presence serves as a powerful positive influence for Thai Buddhists and foreigners.

Purging and Herbal Sauna

It has been reported that all addicts who attended the Thamkrabok program agreed that purging did relieve “craving” for alcohols and drugs, and the reputation of the project both in Thailand and abroad certifies to widespread belief in its effectiveness. In an interview (Flamm, 1993, p.25 cited by The Asia-Pacific NGO on Drug and Substance Abuse Prevention 2005), the abbot was quoted as giving the following therapeutic benefits of vomiting:

Nausea is a prime symptom of drug withdrawal, the symptom which is consistently feared by incoming patients. Overcoming nausea by causing severe vomiting is part of the treatment and makes a deep impression upon the patient. First, it gives him or her the feeling of having effectively purged all the narcotics. Second, severe vomiting masks over the abstinence syndrome, so most patients tolerate and forget about withdrawal symptoms. Third, it causes physical weakness; and fourth, it is perceived as a kind of “punishment” and is expected to have a chastening effect that would prevent an ex-addict from relapsing into the old habit. (p.45)

The notion of purging narcotics from the gastrointestinal system by means of vomiting is not consistent with Western medical views of addiction, which focus on the presence of drugs in the bloodstream and effects of drugs on the central nervous system. Nevertheless, purging could be effective in relieving “craving,” either physically or as a symbolically meaningful and emotionally cathartic act. Regarding the abbot’s second point, perhaps profound vomiting does mask the abstinence syndrome,

much like the familiar case of the tobacco smoker who loses all interest in smoking during a severe bout of influenza. The patients informed that they felt very weak and tired during the first few days of detoxification, and this possibly takes the concentration aside from the withdrawal symptoms they would normally have suffered. In regard to the fourth point, several addicts reveal of the detoxification phase as a miserable experience, which they would not desire to reiterate. Perhaps the intensity and suffering develop a lasting memory that reinforces emphasis on their determination to avoid alcohols and drugs in the future.

In the West, emetic drugs have been used in aversive-conditioning procedures, but that would seem to be according to an altogether different paradigm. Typically, in aversive conditioning, the drug is paired with exposure to the emetic. After conditioning has occurred, subsequent encounters with the drug will induce nausea (The Asia-Pacific NGO on Drug and Substance Abuse Prevention, 2005). The patient would then be less likely to return to drug use. At Wat Thamkrabok, however, there is no explicit procedure of pairing nausea with exposure to stimuli associated with drug use. During the purging ritual, anti-drug slogans are chanted, while the addicts are in the act of vomiting, and it could be argued that some kind of conditioning of nausea to drug-related stimuli may be occurring. Besides the herbal medicines, green herbal sauna is the highly speculative combination that can further purify, detoxify and reinvigorate the body.

Shock and Discipline

The term “shock” has been described as the harshness and difficulties of the rehabilitation program, despite the fact that the patients viewed the shock experience as therapeutic. Shock-incarceration techniques, sometimes referred to as “boot camps,” have been in operation in the US and UK since the early 1980s (MacKenzie, 1994). The basic rationale for these procedures is that they provide structure and discipline, something that criminals and drug addicts supposedly lack. They are modelled after military boot camps and involve many hours of physical training and drill, also include rehabilitation and educational activities. Recreation is fairly limited,

typically consisting of only a few hours per week.

The shock incarceration programs have also been tested in the US for drug offenders, yet there is not much consensus on the effectiveness of these methods (MacKenzie, 1994). One difficulty is that a large percentage (30 to 50%) of entrants ceases to participate before completion. Nonetheless, this problem will not happen at Thamkrabok monastery as leaving before reaching the end is not an option. Singapore also has been utilising shock-incarceration methods (i.e., cold turkey, indoctrination, drilling and physical training, strict rules and harsh conditions) together with rehabilitation activities at its drug user rehabilitation centres (Ong, 1989 cited by The Asia-Pacific NGO on Drug and Substance Abuse Prevention, 2005).

In the Thamkrabok monastery, the participants wear uniforms and are marched to single file in small groups to attend scheduled activities announced over the loudspeaker. The monks monitored, directed and controlled every waking moment of the lives of the participants. Even if perhaps not as harsh as a prison boot camp, there appeared to be a strong emphasis on discipline and a strong expectation to comply with the regulations or accept punishment, including physical beatings and confinement in chains.

One of the rationales for boot camp programs is that they might serve as an initiation experience for addicts to earn the right to return as respected members of society. This is consistent with the goal of returning the addict to his/her community, "FULLY CURED, head held high - with dignity restored". In traditional Thai society, it has been the custom for young men to enter a monastery for a period of a few months, which might be thought of as a kind of initiation into adulthood and in order to make merit for their parents. Perhaps staying at Wat Thamkrabok serves a similar purpose for participants due to the overwhelming majority of whom are young Thai males.

Another aspect of boot camp projects is the companionship or bond that forms between participants. At Thamkrabok monastery, there is a kind of natural segregation into cohorts of addicts who enter at the same time and who will remain together throughout their stay. The bond between these members was evident in the way that they were proud to help one another

through the program, which is the switch roles to become the helper.

Sacred Vow

A central aspect of the Thamkrabok healing program, as conceived by the abbot, is the value of making a spiritual commitment and solemn vow to the Buddha or according to one's own religious beliefs as a condition of entry into the program. Such a vow will be based on good intentions, and may be quite heartfelt and sincere.

Furthermore, it would seem that making a sacred vow or *sajja* to abandon the use of alcohols and drugs for the rest of one's life might result in a terrible sense of failure and guilt. For example, if one were to lapse, it may lead to the "abstinence violation effect" in turn. This not only disappoints oneself, family and friends, but also has broken a sacred promise to the Buddha. This is the threat of retribution by the "spirit," who will punish those who break the vow (TARA Detox Organisation, 2011; Thamkrabok monastery, 2011).

A further positive view would be that giving a *sajja* and a commitment to change supports to restore a sense of dignity and aspiration as well as provides a sense of intention. The success of healing is guaranteed after addicts making the sacred vow. Because there is no possibility of leaving the project until completion, at least while in the confines of the program. The *sajja* is made again upon completion of the 10-day program. Since when the addicts return to his/her community, they may have overcome the physical part of the illness and the battle then becomes a mental and spiritual one, and it is thought that the vow will provide strength, especially if accompanied by a supportive environment.

Conclusion: Success of the Thai Buddhist Healing Program

According to research conducted at the Thamkrabok monastery, 70 percent of program graduates following completion of the treatment was reported living drug-free lives. However, the definition of "success" is not given, though lifelong abstinence is clearly a major purpose of the program. The Thamkrabok rehabilitation program has been designed within the local

context to serve Thai addicts, the overwhelming majority of which are youth, male, and Buddhist. Even so, we argue, it can be assumed that the program is an appealing alternative to Western treatment approaches. The attractive features for this group might be the exotic nature of the healing technique, the use of herbal medicines to relieve “craving”, the emphasis on Buddhism, and the challenge and adventure of completing the course. One aspect of the Thamkrabok program that is highly attractive is the very low cost of operations. Furthermore, the popularity and longevity of this healing program can be proposed that it not only provides a valuable notion and service to alcohol and drug addicts in Thailand, but also contains some unique therapeutic elements which would prove effective in rehabilitation programs elsewhere.

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