

Monk on a Mission

Saving the orphans of Northern Thailand

DAVID A. TAYLOR

BUDDHA'S LOST CHILDREN

MARK VERKERK, DIRECTOR

EMS Films, 2006

AS the lights go down, the sound of a stream is heard. The first images show a bare-chested man cross-legged on a tall stone spur in the forest, limbering up his arms and neck in what looks like a cross between meditation and martial arts. His face is calm, but his body wears a wild constellation of tattooing: calligraphy wriggles down his arms, and a winged horse flies across his chest.

The man is a Thai Buddhist monk. In the next moment, he's egging on two boys who are fighting. "That's it!" he cries. "Kick into his neck."

The new documentary *Buddha's Lost Children* tells the story of the maverick monk and former pro kickboxer Khru Ba and his mission to save forgotten souls at the edge of Thai society—drug-infested communities in the mountainous region of northern Thailand along the Burmese border, known as the Golden Triangle. "Look at the things they do," Khru Ba says of the addicted. "Who'll forgive them? The law of the land doesn't forgive them, nor does the law of karma. . . . Only a



Tough Love Maverick monk Khru Ba gives a novice monk kickboxing lessons in Northern Thailand, from *Buddha's Lost Children*.

crazy fool of a monk like me is willing to forgive them."

The hill-tribe groups of that region—including the Akha, Karen, Yao, and Lisu—have for much of their history been at the mercy of larger forces: drug barons, corrupt officials, disease, and poverty. They have always lived at the margins: they dress differently from mainstream Thais, speak in different tongues, and hold animist beliefs. They don't fit in. At Khru Ba's Golden Horse Monastery, he takes their orphaned and abandoned children under his wing and gives them lessons in, among other things, dharma and Thai kickboxing.

"Thai boxing means having a free heart and body; it means not being enslaved to desire, or to drugs," he tells his novices. "Do you understand?" The boys shout yes.

The young novices ride into a village on horseback, saffron robes flapping in their wake, like a gang in a spaghetti Western. The ritual of receiving alms from villagers looks almost like a holdup. Khru Ba shouts out his version of karma: Be good, good things come to you, but "if you're not good, the spirits will break your neck."

Mark Verkerk, the Dutch filmmaker who spent three years making the film, says it is about more than an

itinerant monk. “It was important that the film communicate something universal,” Verkerk told me by email, “something people could relate to from other cultures—and there’s nothing more universal than raising kids.”

Khru Ba left his own wife and two children after a close friend’s death and a vivid dream that commanded him to open a monastery in the mountains of the far north, where one in five youths who turn up for national service are addicted to methamphetamines. Like a spiritual 007, Khru Ba has special permission from the Supreme Patriarch in Bangkok to use whatever methods he deems necessary to address the problems at the kingdom’s edge. “He’s the only monk to have found a way to operate in this border region,” says Verkerk.

The film, with cinematography that combines sweeping landscapes and intimate views of the region’s culture, has taken honors at various festivals in Europe and North America, and in August it had its American theatrical pre-release in Santa Fe. It will soon be available on DVD.

HAVING visited the remote borderlands shown in the film when I lived in Thailand in the 1990s, I wondered how any foreign filmmaker could have the guts to locate his first feature film there. This is no exotic travelogue, shot from the back of a tourist elephant ride. For this story, the filmmaker had to immerse himself in the subtleties of a world far from Bangkok and mainstream Thai culture. The conflicting textures of animism, pop culture, and Theravada Buddhism would be flying all around, and who would sort them out?

In 1995, I worked briefly with Verkerk on a television documentary about Bangkok’s Grand Palace, for which we spent several days preparing to film a traveler’s history of the kingdom. As we roamed the palace and trolled sites along the Chao Phraya



Horseplay The novice monks in *Buddha’s Lost Children* learn to care for and ride horses, many rescued from slaughterhouses.

river for locations, I was the nearest thing to a translator he had, yet he wasn’t rattled by missing half of what our hosts told us. Seven years later, Verkerk read a short article about Khru Ba and returned to Thailand. He journeyed to the Golden Horse monastery and was captivated by the monk’s directness and the way he connected with the children.

“One thing that has always put me off Buddhism as it’s practiced in the West,” says Verkerk, “is how cerebral and esoteric it is, for the most part. Khru Ba, on the other hand, was using Buddhism in a way I’d never seen before: a hands-on, active way to tackle concrete problems”—problems ranging from ethnic tensions, drug wars, and political indifference to domestic neglect, illness, and drug addiction. In Khru Ba’s methods, Verkerk said, “I could actually see compassion working in action. And that’s what I was looking to capture in the film.”

KHRU Ba’s monastery has a folk art statue of a rearing horse as its mascot, along with other statues of boxing poses, and is managed by a single nun, Khun Ead. Pristine in her whites, her black hair neatly braided, she patiently teaches the boys the basics of

hygiene and social interaction, which they never learned at home.

The film’s story centers on two young boys who come into Khru Ba’s orbit: Suk, a boy found orphaned and in a near-catatonic state, unable to interact with other people; and Yee, who comes from a family too poor to care for him, and who may or may not be mute. “Yee’s not quite right,” is how Ead describes him.

The monk and a dozen or so novices travel along the border, occasionally repairing an old temple, making merit. Along the way, the novices learn reading and mathematics and how to care for horses. (At times, the herd numbers up to 120, most rescued from slaughterhouses.) When one horse is severely injured in a fall, the young monks nurse it back to health—a process that Khru Ba says teaches them the link between humans and animals.

Buddha’s Lost Children reels in even the most spiritually disinterested viewer with the visceral experiences of the boys: the loneliness of a midnight campfire with the drone of chanting in the darkness beyond, which brings one small novice to tears; the stark vision of an empty path as Yee leaves his village, where children have no

better way to pass the time than to jump over open flames. Yee resists talking, even when Khru Ba commands him to speak. When the monk tells the boy to close his eyes and imagine the sun, he sees nothing.

These children's fears are huge and engulfing, and with good reason. Yet their growth is just as stupendous. One of the most thrilling scenes comes when we see Yee, who has sat on a horse only once before, mount up for the ten-kilometer ride to Khru Ba's camp. The sight of four boys on horseback, racing along the ridge, is breathtaking.

There is no avuncular narrator, thankfully, but that means the many narrative subtitles have to pack loads of information. Still, it also means that, except for the occasional flute sound track, we hear only the sounds of their world: their words and the forest noises.

The most shocking scene of the film hits from nowhere. While helping the monks rebuild a remote border temple, a local youth grumbles about the "crazy monk," igniting Khru Ba's fury. The former boxer lashes out, yelling and overpowering the young man physically, and his outburst unsettles the novices as well as the viewer. Ultimately the troublemaker apologizes, apparently genuinely contrite. But the incident leaves me with questions—which is as it should be: nobody is beyond questioning, including Khru Ba. Still, as the fates of Yee and Suk unfolded, I found myself moved by how far they've come and the strength of Khru Ba's compassion.

Buddha's Lost Children shows the helping power of Buddhism in action. Khru Ba states it clearly: "I want to teach people the basic skills of living, teach them that life isn't just a matter of chance, it's a matter of choice." ▼

David A. Taylor's last article for Tricycle, "Memories of Thailand," appeared in the Summer 2007 issue.

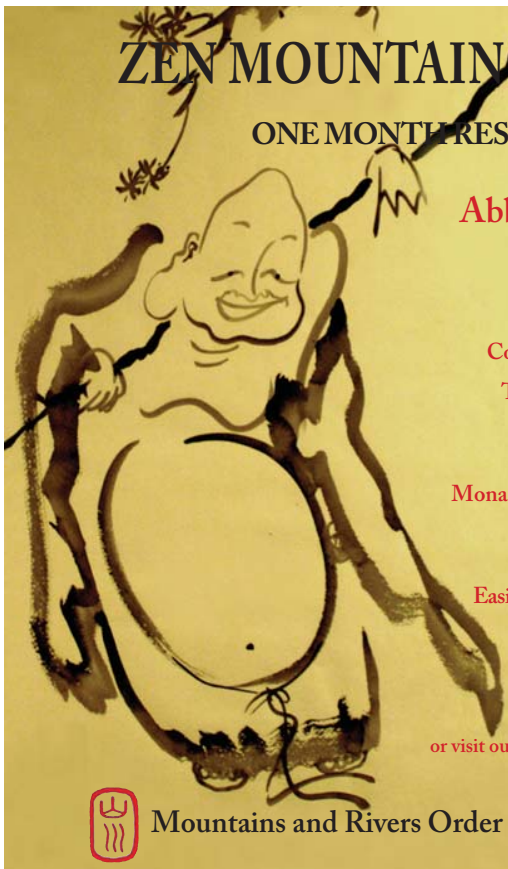



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