

The historical origins of Krabi Krabong once accurately recorded for the prosperity and cultural heritage of the Thai people was lost when the plundering Burmese viciously destroyed the capital city of Ayutthaya. This reckless wanton destruction of one of the great cultural and religious centers of Asia included the demolition of temples, great works of art, religious artifacts and the royal archives of its closely guarded annals of medicine, science, art and martial culture. This brutal attack mirrored the Mongol's own total decimation of the Burmese capital of Pagan, once the crown jewel of Burma's vast cultural center, over 400 years prior.

The origins of any martial culture can be clearly found within the nomadic tribes once called the Ai-Lao, which was a name given to the early Siamese race by the Chinese, who migrated from northern India through eastern Tibet and finally down into the Yunnan Plateau

of China over 5,000 years ago. The scattered tribes after much turmoil and environmental evolution divided into three distinct groups: The Shans, The Ahom and the Lao-Tai. Each group spreading out into the regions later known as Burma, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The combative pressure of the Chinese, who referred to the Thai's as man (barbarians), was incessant.

The late Master Khetr Sriyabhaya described this difficult period, "They were constantly harassed and their peaceful existence disturbed until about 250 B.C., when they left the rich fertile land they called Muang Thaeng believed to have been the area of today's Szechwan, Hupei, Anwei and Hwang Ho in central China. In order to avoid enslavement, the Thais evacuated and dispersed in all directions. Eventually, and with great difficulty, encountering many hardships and having to cope with starvation, injury, disease and death, they became experts in what is today called traditional medicine. Fending off wild animals and all-too frequent battles with savage warlords who never missed a chance to attack, only strengthened their fighting spirit, and their love of freedom overcame all difficulties. Weakened, suffering severely and exhausted, they escaped."

The Thai people in a constant state of warfare lived near water sources in dense forests.

They gradually cleared the forest areas and hunted with axes, spears, arrows, sling shots and fishing hooks. Finally, by the late twelfth century, the Ahom emigrated into Thailand and

settled in the lowlands. Master Sriyabhaya continues, " When the refugees had settled in the area where there were "fish in the water and rice in the fields" (the quote comes from an inscription by King Ramkhamhaeng in 1292 describing his thriving Sukhothai kingdom) elders of the different

Thai clans attempted to build up the courage and skill of the young men by promoting athletic games "...for reasons of security and to ensure their future freedom, a system of self defense was devised...". The development of the initial set of weapons such as knives, swords, battle axes, blowpipes along with hunting traps were frequently some of the tools from their everyday life (much like the Okinawan adoption of the common sickle and tonfa into fierce combative weapons). They created these tools initially with just stone choppers and knives.

"Sophisticated metallurgy also developed in Southeast Asia as early as anywhere in the world. Copper and Bronze working is attested by the excavation at a site in what is now northeastern Thailand of a mold in which bronze axes were cast, dating back to more than

5,000 years ago. There was also iron working in the same region around 3,000 years ago and a considerable pottery making technology," explains David K. Wyatt, a noted historian on Thailand, "It is not unreasonable to suppose that by 2,000 years ago the peoples of Southeast Asia shared a common, distinctive, and advanced civilization". The Thais were a progressive race of people and through much trial and tribulation, changes and improvements, a fierce fighting system began to emerge. Born of the ashes of their persistent battles for survival. Attempting to trace the roots of the actual fighting techniques is difficult since they are now so distinctly Thai. But Buddhism which has a long and extensive influence within Thailand is a good place to start.

The following is taken from Nagabodhi Tomio's study of 'The Bodhisattva Warriors'. "In ancient Hinduism, nata was acknowledged as a spiritual study and conferred a ruling deity, Nataraja, representing the awakening of wisdom through physical and mental concentration. However, after the Muslim invasion of India and its brutal destruction of Buddhist and Hindu culture and religion, the Ksatreyas art of nata was dispersed and many of its teachers slain.... The Muslim invasions and subsequent slaughter of the Buddhist monks and nuns caused many to flee into Southern India, China, and elsewhere. because of this, much of what we know concerning nata within Indian Buddhism comes to us via Chinese tradition and Buddhist writing. Refugees carried with them living knowledge, not only of Buddhist spiritual teaching, but also of its cultural arts and skillful means of teaching... In the countries to which Buddhist nata was taken, particularly Thailand, Korea, and Malaysia, we find evidence of various unarmed martial arts, which were still practiced with nata movements patterns and techniques..". Some commonality can be seen in some of the motions of the ceremonial Krabi as well as the Daab Song Mue.

Some movements are familiar to exponents of Thai and Hindu classical dance. The Mai Sun Sawk techniques are flavored with monkey movements that have a hint of Chinese origin though the attack and defend techniques are very distinctly Thai. The weapon itself on first look resembles something of Japanese or Okinawan origin. But the truth is probably that they were the same common handles of millstones used for grinding rice that the Okinawan used. This unique blend is the very essence of Thai culture and thus its combat arts. Draeger and Smith offer their own glimpse from their classic "Asian Fighting Arts" though the chapter on Thai martial culture is slim and questionable, "... Although its beginnings are unknown, it probably sprang from Sino-Indian origins on the battlefield, possibly modified in the 7th century by the Japanese Samurai Yamada Nagasama, a.k.a. (Nizaemon) (see Battles), who with eight hundred ronin Samurai helped 20,000 Thai warriors to put down dissidence following the death of King Song Thom (1611-1628) in 1628." It is doubtful that the Thais borrowed any actual techniques from the Japanese but they did develop explosive counter-attacks to what they felt were the inferior two-handed sword techniques.

Much in the same way, the Filipino's would adopt their own counters to the famed Japanese sword techniques. This would come in handy should the Thais eventually come to conflict with the Japanese. David K. Wyatt highlights such an episode, "When King Prasat Thong (1629-56) sent Yamada Nagasama to quell a rebellion in Nakon in 1629, the populace soon revolted against Yamada and then against Prasat Thongs usurpation. To make matters worse, Japanese whom Prasat Thong had run out of Ayutthaya had gone to assist Cambodia in attacking Siam." (see Battles). We can see this synergistic evolution most clearly in Traditional Thai Medicine where the influences drawn from India as well as China sowed the seeds of a carefully distilled indigenous healing practice. The earliest practices concerning itself with injuries suffered by combatants in battle and the herbs and the herbs that could heal the open wounds. Herbal medicine drawn from Chinese

influences, nutritional medicine, physical medicine such as Thai massage brought to Siam over 2,500 years ago by Jivaka Komarbhacca, who was a physician, friend and contemporary of the Buddha and a well known figure of the Pali canon as well as spiritual practices aligned to Buddhism formed the nucleus that now includes Western medicine as well.

Krabi Krabong, as the weapons art came to be named in the 20th century, evolved mainly from sword fighting perfected during the Ayutthaya period. And that is why Krabi Krabong's recorded growth and emergence is most closely aligned with legendary Wat Buddhai Sawan.

THE BUDDHAI SAWAN INSTITUTE OF SWORDSMANSHIP

Buddhai Sawan Sword Fighting Institute. The name means " The Free and Brave Buddha's Heaven" after the first Royal Temple to be built under the command of King Uthong in A. D. 1350, soldiers were sent for the specialized and rigorous training to become instructors of the King. Once peace was restored, war could break out again without notice, particularly since the flow of information was slow. Therefore, in order to be well prepared to defend their homeland, they would be taught at the temple the fighting skills.

The Buddhai Sawan Temple could also be considered a Military/ Police Academy of those times, and among the students at the Royal Temple were King Taksin, the ruler of Thonburi, the third Capital of Siam, and Pra Buddha Yod Fha Julaloke, who was the founder of Bangkok, which became the fourth and present Capital in 1782. The existing Buddhai Sawan Institute is a direct spiritual descendant of King Ramathibodi I original school. It owes its existence to the belief and perseverance of one man, the late Por Kruh Samai Mesamarn, who was the last remaining Grandmaster of the Buddhai Sawan Institute.

Por Kruh was born in 1914 at Tambon Ban Thani, Maha Rat District, in Ayutthaya. He is the direct descendant of warriors and noblemen who served the courts of Krung Kao (Ayutthaya) and the early Chakri dynasty and who were once responsible for saving the King. (see Arjarn Samai).

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He spent his youth studying Krabi Krabong and Muay Thai as well as western fencing and Japanese Judo (The Ministry of Education began judo contests for students in 1927 after a Thai Prince became interested and propagated its study). He later earned a degree in Physical Education and was one of the first physical education graduates in Thailand when he opened his first Krabi Krabong school in Wat Rakung Kositaram.

During World War II, Por Kruh owned and operated the Moonlight Bar,

which attracted a diverse group of foreigners both Allies and Axis alike. He cleverly used this operation as a cover for his covert intelligence gathering work for the Seri Thai, an underground resistance movement that attempted to drive the Japanese forces off Thai soil. Por Kruh Samai taught many of these covert agents and guerilla fighters the most lethal techniques of Krabi Krabong and Muay Thai on the makeshift grounds of the Wat.

After the war, Por Kruh promoted Muay Thai and attempted to bolster support for the growing sport. In 1957, he finally established the Buddhai Sawan School of Swordsmanship with the purpose of perpetuating the art of Krabi Krabong just as it was handed down to him. The same year, His Majesty the King - well aware of the role played by the school in promoting Krabi Krabong awarded Por Kruh Samai with a victory flag as a token of his patronage.

Although most Universities and colleges have an active Krabi Krabong team, the College of physical Education in Bangkok is the only official institution where the sport is taught regularly in a course that was introduced in 1936. The courses at the Buddhai Sawan are the complete Krabi Krabong program that begins with Muay Thai and takes you through the whole system from combat to sport and is currently the only institution that does so.

THE BUDDHAI SAWAN INSTITUTE OF SWORDSMANSHIP

Many of Por Kruh's graduates have gone on to perform at ceremonial functions and even in movies and television shows which are arranged through the alumni association established in 1983. A number of graduates have served in the military's primary paratrooper regiments. A few have even been selected as members of the elite security force chosen to guard his Majesty the King. Por Kruh believes that anyone though can benefit from the practice of Krabi Krabong both young and old. It continues to be taught to commandos, elite infantry units, royal bodyguards and many, many young children. In his later years, Por Kruh Samai Mesamarn continued to personally teach and promote his chosen art even just before his untimely death at the age of 84. As he had once said in a newspaper interview, "I believe that our effort to promote Krabi Krabong is a great tribute to our ancestors, for the art of Krabi Krabong will outlast any statues or monuments."

In the past not many foreigners were allowed to learn the master secrets of the art, Although more foreigners now are being allowed into the secrets of the system. In the past, a Thai Master would not teach a foreigner the weapons until he has first trained in Muay Thai for some considerable time. When a student has trained in Muay Thai for the appropriate time he may be accepted by his master and must first take the 'Acceptance Ritual'.

One of the old rituals, though this is not followed much today, was that the student would burn joss sticks and give a present or small

sum of money and a flower to the master. The master will then pray for his student, who must take the oath and promise to be a proper and trusted disciple of the chosen school.

Sometimes at the camp there was often seen a huge pot which was filled with the weapons of past masters of the school, some of which may be several hundred years old. During the ritual the master would take a ladle of water from this pot and anoint his student with it. The student has to accept the responsibility for the art and for the school and must promise not harm either or he shall be expelled. The oath which the student takes, roughly translated is as follows:

The Oath

"We have come to worship the teacher and to solemnly promise to be honest disciples.

We will respect you and have complete trust in you, Sir. We will treasure all traditions, rules and everything we will learn from you.

We will make your style and technique our own.

We will never think, say or do anything to harm the camp or our friends.

We swear that our words are honest and to be kept forever. Earth, heaven and the four directions are our witness.

We beg you to protect us always, with our bodies and our words and our soil.

Thus, we beg you to teach us everything you know to help us to succeed, to protect us from dangers and bless us with love and happiness forever."

When a student is accepted by the master, the training begins. The first thing a student learns is the slight difference in stance from Muay Thai. Then the holding of the weapon and how to control it. The student is taught the basic strikes and blocks using the sticks which are made of rattan cane and represent the swords, but are an effective weapon in their own right. The sport of "Daab Oon Nuam" (literally translated ; wooden sword fighting) uses padded sticks which were originally covered in cotton but today are wrapped in foam. The padding allows the students to do full contact sparring which also incorporates the Muay Thai techniques. It is taught as part of the schools curriculum in Thailand.

To see actual sword demonstrations one must visit the 'Buddhai Sawan Temple' which is steeped in ancient traditions or the 'Rose Garden' near Bangkok, where students put on daily displays of all the systems of Krabi Krabong.

Before each sword-fighting bout, one would witness the 'Ram

Daab' (Sword Dance) which is similar to the Ram Muay (Boxers Dance) which is seen before a Thai Boxing match. The Ram Muay differs from school to school. This was to prevent students from the same school from fighting with each other which was forbidden by Thai regulation. The dance symbolizes respect to the old masters of the art and to the gods, so that they will infuse the warrior with strength agility and skill, and make the warrior invincible.

The dance is performed using one or two swords which are ornate and elaborate weapons, but are used purely for the 'Ram Daab' and not for fighting. Krabi Krabong also makes use of empty handed techniques, including holds, locks, throws, breaks and strikes to pressure points. In Muay Thai boxing these have been reduced down to just a few techniques.

Wat Buddhai Sawan:

by Vincent Giordano

It is not known exactly when the temple was founded but it was already the source of many skilled military men. The temple located in Tambon Wieng Lek or village of iron so named because many villagers in the surrounding areas made their living by forging iron into knives, spears, and swords. Wat Buddhai Sawan in those early days, was a center for education, religious ceremonies, meetings, and medical treatment, and a monk acted as teacher, doctor and priest.

After a war, army leaders would become monks for a certain period to ask forgiveness for killing on the battle field. The King designated the temple as his first Royal Monastery and appointed the venerable Somdej Phra Sankaraj Kurupajarn as its first abbot.

It was at the Wat Buddhai Sawan that the warriors and noblemen of the Ayutthaya period trained in the mastery of the nine traditional weapons as well as unarmed fighting and self defense. To ensure survival of the country the greatest warriors of the time came together to codify and record their fighting techniques. A concise manual of warfare the 'Chupasart' was written which contained all of these fighting methods and constantly updated with new innovations only after such techniques had proven effective on the battlefield. This manual openly shared among the Thai people.

There are no dates for the Chupasart but it could have likely been requisitioned under the reign of King Ramathibodi II (1491-1529) who produced it as David K. Wyatt explains, "...for the guidance of his armies, a "treatise on Victorious Warfare" was compiled, outlining the causes of war, military strategy and martial arts and tactics. The versified text is written in such a manner as to suggest that military accomplishments had become accepted as worthy of a man of culture."

These ancient proven martial skills served as Siam's insurance policy for over four centuries, enabling the country to conquer and hold at bay the kingdom's numerous enemies, making her for much of that time the greatest military power in Southeast Asia. It was also during this time, that Siam acquired vast supplies of guns and ammunition from the Portuguese who later assisted them in their use and manufacture.

It is difficult to imagine the history of Ayutthaya would have been the same without King Naresuan (1590-1605), also known as the 'Black Prince' was once a captive of the Burmese, (see Hero's) for he is one of those rare figures in Siamese history who, by virtue of dynamic leadership, personal courage, and decisive character, succeed in Herculean tasks that have daunted others before them. (Also see battles & wars). King Naresuan encouraged the development of empty handed fighting even though by this time firearms were already in use. These movements developed out of the Krabi Krabong weapons system helped to further its effectiveness. These battlefield empty hand techniques eventually developed into the original bare knuckle sport variant of Muay Thai. The King then participated in competitions and training exercises and helped spread the fighting system across the nation.

The knowledge of Krabi Krabong was not only solely restricted to the military alone. Almost every abled bodied Thai of that period was trained in some aspect of Krabi Krabong. Armed citizens of key towns would often arm themselves to not only stall but sometimes successfully route invading enemy forces. It is interesting to note that woman are allowed to train at the current Buddhai Sawan because in many battles they would often dress themselves as men and go out to fight side by side with their husbands and fellow townsmen. (see Hero's - also see Battles & Wars). Many of Siam's greatest warriors and leaders were schooled at the Wat Buddhai Sawan, including the legendary Tiger King (Phra Chao Suua), King Taksin and King Rama I (see Royalty, also see Hero's and Battles & Wars), all who trained under the celebrated Arjarn Khong.

King Suua (1703-1709) or Tiger King, a ruthless, bloodthirsty ruler who was known for his ferocious fighting ability, traveled often incognito to participate in various Muay Thai matches around the region. Though it has been reported that most villagers knew who he was and in a kingdom where God and country remain supreme, no one would dare touch the King and so many took the fall gracefully. King Sua's reign would be an extremely calm time in Thai history and he furthered the spread of Muay Thai into small towns and fairs as well as making it mandatory training for his army. Being a good Muay Thai fighter was a sure way to military advancement.

It was in 1767 A.D., that the invading Burmese armies finally brought down Ayutthaya after a brutal prolonged battle. The Buddhai Sawan was left unscathed as the Burmese troops took cover inside the compound as the entire city burned all around

them. It survived the devastation and destruction that had befallen the great kingdom but it marked the sad end to what was now to become a relic that remained forever lodged in hearts of the Siamese people. Soon after, General Phraya Taksin and his followers fought their way out of the fallen city and set up a base in a small port on the west bank of the Chaophraya river. He carefully rebuilt his army and soon had the power to drive the Burmese back across the border retaking the capital city. It was then the now King Taksin decided not to return to Ayutthaya but instead shift the capitol south to Thonburi where the present Buddhai Sawan now stands. (see Hero's, also Battles & Wars).

The sword was the principle weapon during the turbulent history of Siam, but the art of fencing was taken a step further in skill by warriors who fought with blades in both hands. This style of fencing dates back 2,000 years according to experts, and began when men of the Mon race from the North took refuge in Siam and were organized into fighting units called Krom Dap-Song-Mu, or "Sword in both hands".

These fierce warriors maintained their skills with constant training, following 10 basic positions which included standing on guard, "dancing", "checking", "swaggering", and the actual clash of cold steel. The coup de grace or final blow usually led to the decapitation of the foe, as opposed to the body thrust or slash of Western fencing.

Besides its deadliness in hand-to-hand combat, the art of fencing with two swords was regarded as a public display of skill and courage during feasts and festivals. These displays were held with the same ritual, as modern Tai boxing. The combatants wore costumes with talismanic figures on them and amulets around their heads.

Pipes and drums were used to mark time during contests and whip the spectators into the same heady enthusiasm that you would see nowadays at Rajadernm or Lumpinni stadiums. This same rhythm is captured in the Siamese tune "Muan Ram Dap" which was composed in honor of the Mon fighting tradition. In more contemporary times, the famous royal heroes King Naresuan the Great and King Ekatathosarot were highly skilled in fighting with two swords and their art took a big toll of Burmese invaders, who laid siege to the old Siamese capital, Ayutthaya, in 1586.

Thai sword-fighting held on as a national art and a means of self-defense until about 150 years ago, during the reign of King Rama II, when the army was reorganized and equipped with

modern musketry and cannon developed in the West. Fencing schools now fence the Mon way, most famous of which is the Sritrairat Camp located on the outskirts of Dhonburi.

It's been called 'brutal' too dangerous to practice, but it has only in the past few years begun to arouse a somewhat curiosity. Anything thing with this kind of reputation must be very special and if your goal is to be the best fighter you can become, then this is must be the style for you..? But then, when it comes down to it, all fighters want to been known as the best, or when it appears to be a life or death situation, then they all want to be known as the baddest dude around, with the don't mess with me approach. What many don't know is that Muay Thai or Thai Boxing is only a milder, more sanitized and safety conscious version the real self defense art of Thailand Krabi Krabong...

Thailand was once part of a vast empire incorporating parts of Indonesia and the Philippines. It is speculated by many martial artist that Thai boxing came from a mixture of Chinese empty hand fighting and Indonesian Silat. However, the fierce Thais developed it into an art of unparalleled power and brutal efficiency. The primary arts of Thailand are Muay Thai, Chaiya Boxing (southern Thailand), Muay Chao Khuerk, Lerd Rit (Military style) and Krabi Krabong, the Thai weapons system.

Throw in a few more relative arts, add a pinch of Indian ground fighting, sprinkle a flavor of Vietnamese, Lao and Burmese and you've got yourself a well rounded system. If you have ever studied Krabi Krabong, you will know that it is more than just military arms of wood, iron, leather and feather, it includes the use of pure physical weapons as well. These have been found to just as effective, if not more so, then wood and iron..

n ancient times, Krabi Krabong was a system of attack and defense devised by idle warriors to practice and test their skills as well as to keep themselves fit and competent for battle. On the battlefield, those honed techniques became whirlwinds of destruction.

Krabi Krabong though is not an antiquated discipline whose only contemporary value is as a form of entertainment, it is a living martial art. Though in his teaching Por Kruh places a great deal of emphasis on the performance aspect of the art; when he speaks of Krabi Krabong he dwells on its great utility. Modern weaponry has changed the face of war, making large scale conflict with swords and spears a thing of the past. Yet the weapons of Krabi Krabong are for the most part silent ones and as such still warrant themselves a place in contemporary warfare. Though the system may look deceptively simple, one must remember that it was a combat oriented art. Arjarn Jason Webster, the first American gold sash graduate of the Buddhai Sawan, explains the nucleus of the system,

" This Apparent simplicity, on the surface of the art, reflects the underlying emotion inherent in it. That is the quick, economical destruction of the opponent. bearing in mind that Krabi Krabong, and its offspring Muay Thai, evolved from Thais defending their homeland and not wanton imperialism or inter-tribal conflict. Therefore, at the core of the Thai martial arts exists the belief that if fighting must take place, the wholesale destruction of the opponent is warranted - and in the quickest, most powerful fashion. It is due to this aspect that the Thais and their martial arts are so highly respected for their fighting spirit and ferocity. The Thai

martial arts embody these emotions at their center but contain many complex movements requiring grace, agility and skill. Though based only on a few tenets - such as power, speed and simplicity - the art utilizes its techniques in combinations and variations of which there are endless permutations. The goal being the immediate, natural response to the attack with quick, decisive strikes to incapacitate expediently."

Students begin training at the Buddhai Sawan by learning the empty hand techniques of the original bare knuckle Muay Thai. Through line drills once taught to the military, the students learn the basic kicks, punches, knees and elbows common to Muay Thai. He will then progress through the original full length Wai Kruh and Ram Muay and be schooled in the binding of the hands with rope. What is essential about training is that the empty hand techniques will later be inserted into the weapon fighting. The techniques learned must be strengthened considerably so he can deploy them rapidly and with precision during a fast exchange. In addition, empty hand against weapons will also be taught as the practitioner's skill level progresses. These basics will prepare the practitioner to begin training in the first of the three weapons taught: the Daab, Daab Song Mue and the Krabong.

The dance of the weapons is essential to Por Kruh's teaching and the student will spend much time perfecting it under his watchful eye. Some sets include a kneeling form as well as a standing one. The dance follows the close spiritual traditions of Thailand. One also sees the importance of dancing in the Indonesian arts of Pentjak Silat and Kun Tao as well. Weapons will be changed from session to session, morning might be a single sword session with the afternoon being staff and evening double swords. One must clear his mind and flow with the heavy demands made on the practitioner. It is only through self determination, perseverance and will can the mastery of Krabi Krabong come.

A practitioner will learn a dance for each of the traditional weapons. The ritual dances - Wai Kruh, Kheun Phrom, Lod Lor and Dern Plaeng are an integral part of the system. These sets are often accompanied by timed drum beats. The appropriate tempo matching the actions displayed. In actual demonstrations a set of musical instruments (Pi'Chawa, Ching and Glong Kaek) are often employed just as in Muay Thai. Combat sets for each weapon are simultaneously taught. At times with the rattan and other times with the steel.

Then different weapons are matched against one another such as Plong versus Mai Sun Sawk. Mass attack and self defense are also taught in addition to empty hand against any of the above mentioned weapons. In the mornings, when the bigger classes of children attend the Buddhai Sawan, there are Buddhist meditation and chanting for half an hour before training begins in the first cycle from 9am - 12 noon, then again from 1pm until 4pm and finally for those living inside the temple from 7pm until 9pm.