

Introduction

I have traveled throughout Southeast Asia since 1999 and have enjoyed both the people and the diverse health care providers from the area. In fact my decision to return to medical school was in part due to discussions with medical providers from India to Cambodia. A Thai friend of mine, who knew of my interest in medicine, became a monk in 2002 and later informed me about a fellow monk who had built a Wat / clinic (Wat Huay Pong) that was located in the mountains between Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. The clinic practiced herbal medicine and traditional Thai healing. It was close to the trekker lodge my sister and I were staying at and we decided to visit the clinic.

During the drive to the Wat, along approximately eight kilometers of dirt / mud roads (after you leave the main highway) you cannot help but be impressed with views of mountains, fields, and forests. Thankfully the dirt road is a few kilometers shorter now due to the government's installation of some hardtop. The mountains were both enchanting and relaxing to drive through and the Wat was sitting on the top of a mountain adjoining a huge national park. I got the feeling that the environment here would be an asset in treating patients, especially those who needed to unwind.

On our arrival at the Wat, we were greeted by a number of children from the local villages who were playing games, as well as a number of other people who turned out to be patients. My friend could translate for us and we also found that the nurse / nun (Kay for short) who was working at the clinic had spent many years in America and could also help translate. We were introduced to a monk who turned out to be Phra Vichien, and he invited us to look around the Wat and to feel free to ask questions. I still remember the huge smile and the accommodating manner of Phra

Vichien at our initial meeting. We talked to a number of patients and I specifically remember a pair of young girls who were being treated for HIV related skin infections. They were just so happy and alive that it was hard to believe that they had come to the clinic for help because their HIV had lead to uncontrollable infections which had horribly scared both their legs.

We had a long talk with Phra Vichien about the clinic and he explained to us that the Wat was recognized by the Thai government (mostly for HIV, but also for the treatment of drug, alcohol, and smoking addictions). He told us that the clinic charged no fees or reimbursement costs and even provided primitive rooms for patients that needed to stay for long-term treatment. The Wat was a virtual garden within the mountains; with fruit trees, flowers, and botanicals, too numerous to count, growing both wild (within a few meters) and being cultivated (both for the ambiance and for harvesting).

Both my sister and I were impressed with the quality of life of the patients and the fact that the clinic used local medicinal herbs in treating the patients. It quickly became clear that spirituality and compassion were integral parts of the treatments. After a time I told Phra Vichien that I would like to learn more about his treatment methods and asked if I could return in four or five years, after my graduation from medical school, to make some records of his work. He stated that I was welcome to come anytime, but perhaps I should come before I graduated. My sister and I left the Wat feeling we had found something unique and worth following up upon. We kept in touch with Phra Vichien and Kay over the next year and both decided to return to the Wat in the near future.

At the end of the following summer I had finished my first two years and took my academic boards. Then I arranged to do research on the herbs at the Wat / clinic

during a two month visit and bring the results back to the university. Despite an invitation to stay at the Wat, I stayed at a friends tourist lodge, on the next mountain, and traveled to the Wat daily for instructions. I also traveled to the local city of Chiang Mai (about an hour and a half away by motorcycle) to consult with professionals at the local medical school and to get access to computers. This was a very productive time during which I was introduced to the treatment regime at the Wat and underwent the same treatments that were being given to the patients - Phra Vichien believes that the only way to learn about treating patients is to know what the herbs taste like and how they act. Phra Vichien was gracious enough to spend a few hours each day I traveled to the Wat in order to give me lessons and to have discussions.

I was shown how to make many of the medicinal formulas and was allowed to make a lot of the medicines used by the patients. During this time I met a number of patients being treated at the Wat as well as quite a few ongoing patients who returned to the Wat to give their respects to Phra Vichien and to pick up medicine for continuing treatments. In addition, many people came to receive steam inhalation treatments for general detoxification. It was at this time I became more familiar with Phra Vichiens long history of treating drug, alcohol, and tobacco addiction, as well as a large number of HIV cases. What also became clear at this time was the importance of the large doses of spirituality, which always went along with the herbal treatments. I was introduced into Phra Vichiens philosophy that physical healing without mental and spiritual healing was weak and not as effective as all three combined. He also made clear that neither he, or doctors in general, actually could heal anybody; rather they help the patient heal him or herself. In addition, teaching the patients how to

heal themselves and take care of their own health (physical, mental, and spiritual) was the foundation of long-term success.

During the next year my sister managed to visit the wat for a month. During this time she made copious corrections and expansions on my initial notes. She found this visit to be an important and moving experience in her life.

In 2005/2006, with Phra Vichiens blessing, I decided to take a year off from medical school and to do a more extensive recording of the herbal uses and treatments used at the Wat. While this current work is still a “work in progress”, this episode provided the bulk of the information contained in this work. During this time Phra Vichien’s devotion to: a spiritual life, the Thai nation, and the Thai king were all made clear to me. I was allowed to accompany him during all aspects of his work and endeavors including his herbal activities, patient interactions, and administrative duties, but also his *pindapata* (alms gathering) and other spiritual underpinnings of his life.

It is interesting that over the past couple of decades the Thai government has taken an active interest in promoting as well as saving the traditional Thai medicinal practices. This includes promoting the use of Thai traditional medicinal herbs in the existing western primary care system and the support of traditional medicinal practitioners. The cornerstone of traditional Thai medicine is a healthy mind, body and spirit, which are all addressed in any of their healing modalities. This fits well with the emerging naturopathic perspective that is gaining ground in the west. This is certainly the situation I found and was allowed to be a part of at Wat Huay Pong. I can say that my relationship with Phra Vichien and the Wat have been wonderful, challenging, and a guide to my development.