

Jom Ratchan: Shiva's Voice in Northern Thailand

by Daniel Reid

I must admit I was sceptical when my friend Joe telephoned to invite me to meet a spirit-medium who channels the awesome Hindu deity Shiva here in Chiang Mai, only a few kilometers from my house. Sham shamans abound in the hills and valleys of northern Thailand, and many of them look for "spirits" in the bottom of a bottle, so I had my doubts.

"But this medium is rare!" exclaimed my friend, who's an Italian photographer. "I'd like you to come along and tell me what you think of him. You know more about this sort of thing than I do." Joe wanted to photograph him for the Sunday issue of the Bangkok Post, and suggested that I write the text.

What little I knew of this sort of thing I learned during the 16 years I lived in Taiwan, where channeling spirits (*tung ling*) is as common as playing tennis and golf. Known as *ji-tung* ("Divination Child"), the mediums who provide this service enter a state of trance to allow divinities to speak through them. Owing to their innocence and purity of heart, the young are usually regarded as the best channels for communicating with deities, and Chinese supplicants often pay a fortune to solicit advice and assistance from their patron gods, deceased ancestors, and other spirits. Questions ranging from marriage and money to travel and business ventures are posed to the summoned spirit, who replies through the voice of the entranced medium.

I knew that an ancient spiritual precept strictly forbids the application of advanced spiritual faculties for the purpose of personal profit and power, and over the years I'd seen many clever charlatans posing as pious mediums in order to prey on naive petitioners by manipulating their desires and expectations. When both the medium and the supplicant have their minds focused on fame and fortune, desire and greed, it's far more likely that a deviant demon from a lower astral realm rather than an enlightened deity will take possession of the medium. Posing as the deity, the demon deceives the supplicant with fraudulent advice and drives him astray. A fraudulent deity is even more devious than a fraudulent medium, and when the two team up together, they're a bad bunch and it's best to steer as far away from them as possible. As Confucius wisely taught, "Pay due respect to deities and demons, but stay as far from them as possible."

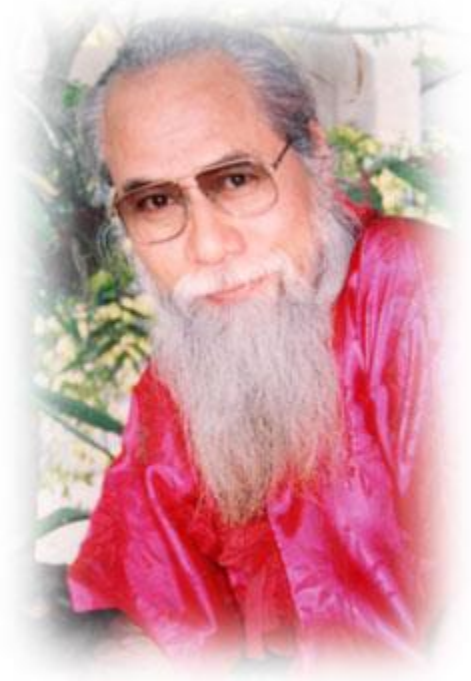
Still, these things have always intrigued me and I couldn't resist. And so, slipping a lucky talisman around my neck for protection, I went with Joe to visit the man.

The moment we drove into the compound I could see and feel that a spiritually inspired hand had been at work here. The entire place was carefully laid out for optimum circulation of energy according to the ancient laws of Chinese geomancy (*feng-shui*), with all structures set at precisely the correct angles relative to one another and to the prevailing features of the surrounding topography. A tall narrow pyramid stood aloof like a huge antenna on the far side of the compound, channeling and focusing cosmic energies into the meditation chamber inside, while on the near side lay the languid pond and a bubbling fountain, providing a constant source of purifying water energy, and serving as a sort of "battery" to store energies from the sky, such as sun and moon light and planetary rays. In a world gone awry, someone here had orchestrated a sublime harmony with nature's elemental energies

and balanced them perfectly with the requirements of human life . You'd have to be comatose not to notice it.

Shedding our shoes at the door, we entered the main shrine room. It was painted bright red from ceiling to floor, wall to wall. Red reflects the energy of the Fire element, the elemental power of Shiva. Why would a Western Buddhist writer come to pay respects to a Thai shaman who consorts with Hindu gods? The answer is enshrined here in an altar cove that runs the full length of the shrine room and houses, in addition to numerous statues of Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu, Ganesh, and other Hindu gods, as well as almost all the important deities and sages of the Orient, including Buddha and bodhisattvas such as Kuan Yin (Kummon) and Bodhidharma (Daruma), various Thai saints, and even the three Chinese "Star Gods" of prosperity, posterity, and longevity. Unlike the jealous monolithic gods of the West, who demand exclusive fealty from their followers, Eastern gods are friendly and tolerant, and they don't mind sharing space on shrineroom altars, or in people's hearts.

An attendant ushered us over to a sofa to meet and interview Khun Anusorn, known affectionately to his followers as Khun Po ("Honorable Father"), the man Shiva had selected as an oracle in northern Thailand. Dressed entirely in red, his greying hair and beard worn long and well-kempt, Khun Anusorn is a tranquilly dignified gentleman in his early sixties, and looks like a hybrid of Hindu sadhu and Taoist hermit, with the compassion and earthy humor of a Buddhist bodhisattva sparkling in his eyes. "A man completely at peace with himself and the world," I jotted in my notebook, "a bridge between heaven and earth, a beacon of light in on the stormy dark seas of samsara. . . "



Looking at him now, you'd hardly guess that not so long ago this shaggy mystic was a wealthy construction magnate in the western Thai province of Kanchanaburi. "It all started about 15 years ago," he said in reply to my first question, "on the last day of *pansah* at a retreat in Chiang Mai." *Pansah* is the annual rainy-season meditation retreat observed by devout Buddhists throughout Thailand, and that year Khun Anusorn had done his retreat in Chiang Mai. "I had just returned to my room, and suddenly, shortly before noon, I completely lost consciousness". When he awoke ten minutes later, he found himself "speaking in tongues," chanting prayers in some archaic dialect which no one could understand. Those who witnessed this thought he was possessed by demons.

"Around two o'clock, it happened again," he recalls, "except much worse. When I awoke, I vomited violently, then started speaking in that strange language again." It happened again at sunset, and this time one of his more spiritually perceptive friends recognized the signs of a spirit- medium manifesting oracular powers . Khun Anusong was not pleased by this prospect, and he did not feel inclined to forfeit his hard-earned fame and fortune in the cosy world of Thailand in order to spout unintelligible messages on behalf of an unidentified deity who wished to speak through him.

"For a long time I fiercely resisted the spirit's summons, but the harder I fought, the sicker I got. I tried curing my fits with medicine, sorcery, and prayer, but nothing worked, and the seizures just kept getting worse and worse, until one day I finally stopped resisting and simply surrendered to the whole process. And that's exactly when Shiva first manifested himself to me. He introduced himself as 'Jom Ratchan' (The Great Sovereign) and clearly explained that this work was my mission in life."

What's it like to be possessed by a deity? "Whenever Shiva wants to borrow my body to channel information or perform a task such as healing, I first feel certain signs such as goose flesh and muscular tremors, then I know instinctively that he wishes to manifest through me." Khun Anusorn takes immediate measures to vacate his bodily vehicle and relinquish control of his sensory faculties to his fiery mentor, Shiva. "I'm not sure how it works he says. "I just relax, let go, and slowly lose consciousness. Then I see red everywhere, and suddenly, with a tremendous jolt, Shiva enters my system. From that moment on, I remember nothing until Shiva's presence leaves my energy field, and my mind returns to its ordinary state."

And who is "Shiva?" Shiva the Destroyer is one of three primary deities in the classical Hindu trinity known as *trimurti*, along with Brahma the Creator and Vishnu the Preserver. Shiva's role is to destroy ignorance, greed, hatred, and other negative emotions that form the roots of human suffering, thereby paving the way for the birth of the wisdom, compassion, and power of enlightened awareness, as personified by Brahma and Vishnu, as well as the Buddha, who in Hindu tradition is an emanation of Vishnu.

In this degenerate age of greed, anger, and corruption, Shiva seems to have his work cut out for him, and both his image and attitude seem well suited to style of contemporary times. With his long hair and beard plaited in dreadlocks, his trident and leopard-skin singlet, his beads and bongo drum, he looks very "Rasta," a sort of Hindu Bob Marley. And in fact music and dance rank high on Shiva's list of favorite activities, and many Shivaite sadhus in India are renowned for their prodigious consumption of hemp (ganja, marijuana).

I asked Khun Po why he wears his hair and beard long and kept in the style of Shiva. "At first I continued to shave and cut my hair short," he replied. "because it's too hot here for beards and long hair. One day when I was in trance and Shiva was channeling through me and communicating with a supplicant, Shiva told that person to give me a stern message: "Tell this medium that if he wishes to keep his head from rolling off his shoulders, he'd better stop cutting his hair and shaving his beard!" Knowing that Shiva meant business, he complied immediately, and today he looks the very image of a Shivaite shaman.

Khun Anusorn has taken a binding, life-long vow to devote the full strength of his spiritual powers, and all of his material resources, to the relief of human suffering and the propagation of spiritual virtues. He specializes in healing the karmic roots of physical disease, including cancer and AIDS, and offers refuge and guidance to visitors suffering from grief, fear, doubt, confusion, and other forms of emotional distress. His work includes consecration ceremonies for household shrines and spirit-houses in private homes, helping business executives arrange their offices and factories for optimum advantage according to the principles of Chinese *Feng Shui* (geomancy), and presiding over private religious ceremonies. When asking for advice through him from Jom Ratchan, it's best not to ask questions about sex and romance, gambling and money, and other worldly desires. Better to focus

on spiritual work , especially the clearance of unseen karmic obstacles from our lives and guidance in the cultivation of spiritual awareness. Khun Anusorn does not charge a fee for his services, but an anonymous donation in a plain red envelope is appreciated to cover the cost of the incense, candles, and fresh flowers he offers his patron deities on behalf of supplicants, and the tasty vegetarian lunch he often offers to visitors.

Most of Khun Anusorn's income consists of donations from grateful clients who he has helped to cure of longstanding afflictions, or who he has helped in other ways. He's not interested in fame and fortune and has turned down several lucrative offers to perform on television in Bangkok, tour the occult circuit in America, and serve as private seer to wealthy households . As a rule, he does not grant interviews , but he immediately consented to Joe's request to let us interview and photograph him for the Bangkok Post because, he said casually, "I owe Joe a big debt from a previous lifetime, and I must repay his kindness in this life." He later explained that in a past life, he was a prisoner-of-war in a very harsh prison camp in the Himalyan region, and Joe was a prison guard who befriended him and allowed him to escape, thereby saving his life. Khun Anusorn is a man who pays his karmic I .O. U.'s!

I asked him about the classical Chinese features I noticed in the arrangement of his garden and compound. "The Chinese gods came to teach me these things during my meditation retreats a few years ago. They showed me how to arrange plants and rocks, as well as doors and windows, for the best balance between the energy of human life and nature's elemental forces, such as wind and water, sun and moon. I simply follow their instructions." After he built a pond in his courtyard, a Chinese deity appeared to him and said, "Water must always keep moving." So Khun Anusorn added a fountain, and immediately noticed an enhancement in his personal energy level, and in the efficacy of his healing powers. The Water element plays a major role in the rituals and healing practices at this ashram.

By now it was nearly 10:00 AM, the appointed hour for Khun Anusorn's daily seance with Shiva, He politely excused himself and went over to the shrine to make the preliminary offerings of incense, candles and flowers before the various deities present there. Then he sat down comfortably in an armchair, facing the central image of Shiva, and reached for his pipe. Loading the English briar with some fragrant pipe tobacco, he fired it up and sat back puffing dreamily in his chair, wreathed in swirling clouds of smoke. Shiva is said to be particularly fond of smoked offerings, as anyone who's spent some time with Shivaite sadhus in India knows very well.

Suddenly he started coughing, then retching, with bone-wrenching convulsions, , expelling a stream of phlegm from his lungs as well as the contents of his stomach, which an attendant kneeling beside him caught in a bowl, then used tissues to clean the discharge from his beard. This was a cleansing process to prepare his body to receive the pure, potent energy of the deity. As the cough subsided, his eyes rolled up till only the whites showed, and his body began to tremble. With the assistance of an attendant, he rose slowly from the chair and shuffled over to a wooden palate set on the floor before the shrine. Muttering sacred mantras, he



donned the regalia of his office: a leopard-skin vest and loincloth; a red headband to tie his hair; several *malas* (rosaries) strung with big "Shiva beads" from India; and a golden hair-clasp to fasten a top-knot on the crown of his head.



As he sat there chanting, legs crossed in lotus posture, a sudden jolt shimmied through his body and wound up his spine like a snake. With a mighty shout, his hips flew up from the palate, legs still crossed in mid-air, and in that very instant Shiva took possession of his body, speech, and mind, the three vehicles of energy through which we express ourselves in the world. The moment he thumped back down on the palate, he burst into a long, loud invocation to Jom Ratchan, chanting in a stentorian tone of voice, reciting sacred prayers in an ancient Hindu dialect that came to Thailand from India about 2,000 years ago, but that few people in Thailand understand any more.

The man was totally transformed: gentle, self-effacing Khun Anusorn had become a brash, bold, booming embodiment of the great Hindu deity from the Himalaya. The first thing he did was purify the shrine and all his ritual paraphernalia by spraying lustral water on everything from his mouth. Then he leaned casually on an arm-rest carved in the shape of a cobra and signalled his attendant that he was

ready for the work at hand.

One at a time, those who have come to see him that day slide forward to ask their questions and receive the deity's reply. Several of his most trusted disciples are always close at hand during these sessions, both to interpret his replies and also to screen out any inappropriate requests or questions, because Khun Anusorn is bound by sacred vows to grant whatever is asked of him, including his own life. His assistants must also scramble around the room to fetch the various ritual implements he hollers for, wipe up the mouthfuls of water he spews everywhere, and scribble the complex herbal prescriptions he spontaneously composes in trance for various ailments. Khun Anusorn has never studied herbal medicine, but when possessed by Shiva, he becomes a master herbalist whose formulas frequently work wonders where modern medicines fail.

Joking and laughing constantly with the supplicants who come to see him, he sometimes speaks in the teasing voice of a child. Shiva's sporting approach to those who petition him through the medium indicates that the Hindu gods must have a wonderful sense of humor, a light-hearted attitude not shared by the dour deities of the West. The ambiance at Khun Po's ashram is always relaxed and homey. While the former construction tycoon sits in trance dressed like a deity, sweating profusely and spraying water on everyone, his wife patters around the room arranging flowers, pouring tea, chatting with visitors, and occasionally laughing out loud at her husband's antics.

Significantly, he never preaches religious dogma while working in trance. His mission is to relieve suffering and provide guidance unconditionally to one and all, regardless of the individual's personal beliefs. This is a refreshing change from the sort of religious salesmanship one so often

encounters these days under the guise of "advice" and "mercy." However, those who seek the deity's help, particularly with health problems, must agree to follow several traditional guidelines drawn from classical Hindu practice, such as following a strict vegetarian diet for 90 days and observing eight simple vows for the first 15 days. These restrictions are important and easy to apply, and they have therapeutic benefits that are part of the cure, but they are not an attempt to convert you. As we shall see below, those who agree to these guidelines but fail to follow them do so at their own peril.

While I cannot vouch for Khun Anusorn's full track record as a spirit healer, I can testify about two cases which we witnessed with our own eyes. One was a twenty-year-old girl who for the past seven years had been suffering from a cancerous tumor growing on her heel, turning her foot and ankle into a massive lump of swollen flesh. Her doctors had been urging her to let them amputate her foot in order to stop the cancer from spreading further through her body. The deity's diagnosis was intriguing: Shiva said that in a previous life she had used that foot to kick her father and that she'd also cursed her mother--both very grave offenses in Asian society--so now she was suffering the karmic consequences of her unfilial behavior.

His therapy was equally intriguing. First he rubbed the entire leg down with sesame oil to drive the toxic energies out through the sole of her foot. Then he picked a red flower from the altar and used it as a wand to splash lustral water from a silver bowl onto her foot. After that, he filled his mouth with water from the same bowl and sprayed it onto her entire leg. . Finally, he mixed an herbal poultice with a dozen aromatic herbs, rubbed it all over her ankle and foot, wrapped it tightly in place with gauze. Last but not least, he sternly reminded her to follow a strict vegetarian diet and to keep her vows, and advised her to meditate for half an hour each day and come back to see him again in a week.

Over a period of one month, during which we saw him work on her three times, the tumor shrank to about one-third its original size, and the girl reported that the pain was almost gone. "Seeing is believing" and we certainly believed what we saw, but her doctors refused to believe it, and they accused her of going to another hospital instead for chemotherapy.

The other case was even more remarkable. A young man appeared at the ashram one day, pleading for help with what his doctors had diagnosed as an advanced and incurable case of AIDS. A bulbous mass of flesh, like cauliflower, was growing on his forehead and spreading across his face. The weight of it was pressing down on his eyes, making it difficult to see. He came to Khun Anusorn in desperation, as a last resort, because no one else would even attempt to treat him.

After only a few treatments, his condition improved significantly. Even Khun Anusorn's wife, who's seen it all, was astounded at how swiftly the therapy took effect on the young man. Applying powerful herbal poultices directly onto the growth, in conjunction with internal herbal formulas, and ladling lustral water over his entire body while chanting healing prayers, Jom Ratchan managed to achieve a remission of the growth in only five weeks. When I last saw him, he still carried a few scabs on his forehead, where the growth had peeled off, but otherwise the young man's face was almost restored to normal.

But he was careless, and even worse, faithless. After less than two months of treatment, he decided that he was fully cured, so he stopped coming to the ashram for treatment. Nevertheless, he would have fully recovered even without more therapy, Khun Anusorn notes in retrospect, if only he

had observed the rest of the program he'd agreed to follow for the prescribed period of three months, particularly the three-month vegetarian diet. But before the 90 days had elapsed, the young man simply couldn't resist his favorite food and violated his dietary vows by eating chicken curry for dinner. His family reports that immediately after dinner he started feeling weak and wobbly--and few days later he dropped dead! Those are the facts: make of them what you will.

Khun Anusorn showed no surprise at this turn of events. He simply shrugged and said, "That's what happens when people petition the gods for help, accept a few simple vows in order to obtain the help they seek, then fail to faithfully follow the program."



After watching Khun Anusorn working in trance for a while, we began to feel a deep affection for him, and a strong attraction to the pure, unconditional realm of spirit and energy in which Jom Ratchan dwells. But Khun Anusorn is only human, and even at peak performance the human energy system can only withstand the powerful presence of high-frequency spiritual entities for about two hours before running out of steam. By noon the medium was exhausted and drenched in sweat, Noting this, Shiva announced, "If there's no further business, I'll be on my way now," and he turned back to face the altar..

These words signaled an attendant to quickly lay a large cushion on the floor behind the medium, in preparation for the grand finale of the deity's departure from the medium's body. Folding his knees up like a pretzel in the full lotus meditation posture, he raised his *damuru* drum aloft in one hand, waved a silver trident in the other, and roared out a final invocation to Shiva and all the other deities



assembled on his shrine table. The deep bass vibrations of his chant had a spellbinding effect on us, emptying our minds of all discursive thought. Finally he put away his ritual instruments, placed his palms together in prayer, and suddenly leaped up off the palate with legs crossed, did a complete back-flip, and landed flat on his belly, falling fast asleep sprawled out on the cushion.

He lay there snoring for about five minutes, then slowly, almost reluctantly, came back into his own body. Blinking blankly, he shook his shaggy head and looked around the room as though lost in a dream, like a man awakening from a long long sleep. He squinted at us for a minute, then we could see the spark of recognition light up his eyes. Khun Po was back; Shiva was gone.

"Let's go have lunch!" he suggested, as he shuffled off to have a shower. "I'm starving!"

"I'm only a bridge," Khun Anusorn explained over lunch, "between the spirit world and the human world . We must all cross that bridge when we die, but if we learn to communicate with spiritually enlightened beings while we're still alive in our bodies, we gain direct access to wisdom, compassion, and power that can greatly benefit our lives on earth, as well as the lives of others, here and now, before we die. This will also help us to cross the right bridge when the time comes to leave this world."

He ate with gusto, replenishing the calories which Shiva had burned in his fiery cauldron. "The reason our world is such a mess today is because humans have become arrogant, and they scornfully ignore the eternal wisdom of god as revealed through the ages by saints and sages. The laws which govern society today are made by man, not by god, and those who make the rules don't even follow them themselves. There's really only one true law that counts in life--a sacred universal law that never changes and applies equally to everyone--and that law is this: **'Help everyone, harm no one.'** That's the only law we need on earth."

He paused to serve us each a generous portion of a special dish he'd cooked for us himself in the kitchen. "I've already given my heart to Jom Ratchan," he said. "Whatever else I have I share with others." Setting the platter down before us, he smiled and said, "Please help yourself to more."

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Travelers in Chiang Mai may visit Khun Anusorn and his wife Wassana at his ashram in the Sansai District, in the northern outskirts of town, at this address:

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