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## THINGS THAT REMAIN IN MY HEART

An Autobiography of Siriphong Kharuphankit

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## Abstracts

This is an autobiography of Buddhist Monk Phra Siriphong Kharuphankit who is an artist and maker of the “teacher's heads,” or the Khon masks devoted to the deities of art, music and dance. Besides being the recollections of a great Thai traditional artist, it also recounts the process of learning a traditional art-form. One of the fascinating aspects of Thai traditional art is how it can be strictly anchored in the past and yet incorporate progressive innovations; how it can be both extremely disciplined and transformative. In Thai traditional art, much emphasis is given to the Wai Khru (the ceremony for the honoring of the teachers). Here we meet Phra Siriphong’s teachers and begin to understand how knowledge is passed down in a Thai traditional art-form.

*Editor's note:*

*We include this autobiography of Phra Siriphong because besides being the recollections of a great Thai artist, it also recounts the process of learning a traditional art-form. One of the fascinating aspects of Thai traditional art is how it can be strictly anchored in the past and yet incorporate progressive innovations; how it can be both extremely disciplined and transformative. In Thai traditional art, much emphasis is given to the Wai Khru (the ceremony for the honoring of the teachers). Here we meet Phra Siriphong's teachers and begin to understand how knowledge is passed down in a Thai traditional art-form.*

***My success today is due to the possession of two merits:  
the merit of a good teacher  
and the merit of a good student.***

I was often asked what inspired me to produce Khon masks instead of pursuing music and singing, that I had studied in school. Every time I have been asked I always tried to dodge the question by giving only oblique answers. I had never revealed the truth in my heart to anyone until the day I was to bring the whole collection of my own works for the inspection of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. This was on the occasion of the opening of the Centenary of Somdejchaophraya Borommahasrisuriyavong (Chuang Bunnag) Building. Because monks are often prohibited from being artists and musicians, the Princess asked: "You are a monk; what do you do when you want to sing or to play a musical instrument? And she recounted "I remember once a music teacher told me about the story of a monk who used to play *ranard* (a Thai xylophone) before he entered monkhood. Later, when this monk wished to play music he had to take his instrument and secretly retreat to a cave in order to enjoy his music." I explained to the Princess, that whenever I have free time, I practice chanting sermons on the Madree Desan Episode of the Vessantara Jataka. And whenever the temple would hold a Mahajataka Festival, I would chant my sermon on the Madree Desan Episode. I have

done this since my first year of ordination. The Princess smiled, and then she asked me about the process of making Khon masks. She enquired why I sometimes used sandalwood powder (my own innovation) in making the Khon mask. Then she further asked if I had any successors to carry on the craft, and if I had ever thought about writing anything about my work for posterity.

Since that day I still did not pursue writing about my life until one day my students came to ask for permission to print a book on the collection of my works (both the Khon masks and the sculpted items) to be distributed to all my students. This inspired my decision to write my own autobiography.

From that day until now, I have tried to construct my life account, from its failures to its successes, from its blind beginnings to self-discovery. It is hoped that the following autobiography might be useful to others. I wrote it from the depth of my heart. It is understandable that to write so straightforwardly may cause an uneasiness to both the writer and the reader. But then, why fear the truth?

### **The Instincts of the Initiate**

What is unique about my life? I often wonder if anyone has had the same feelings as I have had. No one can remember their earliest life and instincts. Yet my first memory is very clear. Early in my childhood I woke up one night because of the loud noise of people moving about, even though the place where I slept was partitioned with a curtain. I heard the *piphat* sound mixed with cheering of a crowd. People were dressed strangely. “What are they doing?” I asked my mother. She answered that they were performing a drama called *Rachathirat* (Saming Phra Ram Volunteer Episode). Together we watched the drama until it ended. They performed their roles very elegantly. I was very much impressed by the character played by Arjan Pranee Samranwong who everyone called the “Chinese Empress” as she looked very wise, dignified and regal.

My memories and attraction to such things may be because I was raised by rather old people, and those around me were mostly elderly. My mother got married when she was no longer young and she had me when she was rather old. Mother used to tell me about her difficult and hard life. She lived from hand to mouth. She had to sell her wares at the school on weekdays and on weekends at Sanam Luang (which at that time was a large market). One day our house caught fire, and we had no time to think of anything but our lives. We lost everything except the clothes we were wearing and the towel wrapped around me to carry me out of the fire. There were four members in our family at that time: grandmother, father, mother and myself. We were fortunate enough to move to a house built on land belonging to the Crown Property. Mom Mae (Khru Supalak Pataranavik) and Mae Mun (Khru Kongoraphat) were kind enough to give us money to buy this house which was behind the Bombay market (Talad Charoen Nakorn).

As a result, mother kept reminding me never to forget people's kindness and to always show them gratitude. By the time I was old enough to remember things, Mom Mae had already passed away. Mother used to tell me that Mom Mae was a very strict person, and very clean too. She would use hot water to clean her dishes and spoons before eating. A scarf was always tied around her neck. She walked with the grace of a drama actress. She always wore a hat according to the policy of that time. I do remember Khru Mun as a white-haired woman who often gave me money to buy *kluay buad chee* (banana in coconut milk). When she spoke to me I could feel the kindness in her voice. In contrast to her was Khru Linchee. You would always hear Khru Linchee coming before you saw her. She had grave looks, was temperamental, always chewed betel-nut, and her hair smelled strongly of *tanee* oil. Although she was sharp-tongued, she was kind-hearted. Every time mother was short of money to buy wares for sale, she always turned to Khru Linchee for help - "Here is the money you want to borrow, Jaemjan." - the tone of her voice and her kind gestures are still vivid in my memory to this day.

## **Developing A Talent**

My memories as a very young child also involve my mother taking me along with her to sell her wares. There was a canal in front of the house and mother was afraid that I would fall into the canal if left alone with grandma. So every morning I had to accompany her. When we arrived at the school, mother would be busy preparing food for selling. I would go to play along the temple verandah. There were plenty of broken bricks with which I liked to build a wall. When I became bored, I would go to see students practicing Thai dancing at the Phra Ruang Pavilion. Sometimes I would pick lantorn flowers, which have sweet and pleasant fragrance, to make a garland. Whenever the school had a fair, mother would spend the night at school, and I was always with her. It was great fun. After dinner, I would go to play with the boarding students, and listen to their tales of “The Twelve Women” (Nang Sibsong) near the lotus pond. I vividly remember playing hide-and-seek at the Chinese Pavilion or the teacher’s house in the soft evening breeze, under the light of the full moon. There was no better place for hiding than the Issaretrachanusorn Hall, behind Khao-Tok Shrine. Most seekers could not find the hiders because they were afraid of the spirits of the Hall. But I was not afraid for I used to enter the Hall to see the Khon masks during the daytime. In those days, that is where they kept them. I especially liked the Phra Rishi masks very much and have ever since. Sometimes I would sneak into the Chariot Hall to take a nap. It was quiet and cool. My other favorite place in the National Museum is the Phratamnak Daeng (The Red House). When I entered this place I felt so comfortable and warm, a feeling hard to describe. My most favorite pastime was to mold clay into all sorts of shapes and everyday I would mold a Phra Rishi head. When I finished with the mold I would put some dust into a bamboo stem and shake it until dust smoke came out of the bamboo stem. This was my way of paying homage to Phra Rishi. The dust smoke was my own substitute for lighted joss sticks. The “Chinese Empress” used to scold me “Nong Noo! You hands and body are so dirty!” Alas! She did not understand what I was trying to do.

## **Primary Education**

When I was 6 years old, mother sent me to attend Amnuaywongwitthaya School in the orchard near our house, but I had to cross the street where there were passing cars. So mother had to hire someone to take me to school and bring me home. Our school holidays were on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. I attended this school until I finished Prathom four but I had to take the final exam at the Central School Amnuaysil, near Tha Dindaeng, which has now become Khulasiri Arts School. During this time, I had less chance to accompany mother. Only on Thursdays, as I didn't spend the night at school. Some Thursdays the "Chinese Empress" would accompany us home, but she would get off at her home in Khlongsarn, which is now the site of a fire station near Charoennakorn Bridge. I remember once entering her house and paying respect to her grandmother.

## **The Turning Point**

After finishing primary education, I joined the first year class at the Dramatic Arts School and chose to study the *piphat* according to my mother's wishes. I myself preferred Khon drama, but mother was afraid I would hurt myself while flexing my arms and legs during the rigorous training exercises. Mother once illustrated this to me by taking me to the Khon drama house to watch them practice. Khru Aram was flexing the body of students who were crying with pain. Mother reasoned that to practice Khon drama would be difficult when one becomes old, but one could have music as companion until old age. Besides, mother was acquainted with many senior music teachers. So I began the first year of music school with the other male classmates.

Each morning we would begin with the National Anthem, followed by one hour of general subjects, and then two hours of elective art subjects in separate classes according to one's choice. Khru Thongyoo was our class teacher. I recall the first time I saw the many musical instruments scattered in the hall, some in cabinets some on the floor. And hanging on the wall were pictures of the departed senior teachers.

The first day in music class, we were all ordered to sit in rows whereupon teachers led students in chanting the *Three Gems* in honor of the past teachers. Then teachers led each student by hand and we took turns striking the gong for the first time. I experienced a difficult time learning the music. I was rather slow in catching up with my classmates who could learn quite fast. I felt I was a heavy burden on the teacher. After teaching other classmates, the teacher would have to use the later part of class period to repeat the song for me again and again. Everyday the teacher would do the same with great patience. He never showed any sign of boredom. On behalf of mother, some senior students also lent a helping hand to practice with me. Still I felt that I did not make any progress. I sympathized with my teachers and senior students who had to tolerate my slowness. Yet, the teachers still encouraged me to practice and practice. They would tell me that since I had no background in music, I had to practice very hard. Later on I asked my classmates why they were so fast in learning their music lessons. They all answered that they played in a *piphat* ensemble at home and most of them learned *Pleng Mon* in order to play at temple fairs to earn some money!

After lessons one day Khru Bangluang Sunthorn said to me, “Nong Noo, this evening you should come to my house”. So we took the ferry at Tha Phrachan to cross the river, and continued by a Tuk Tuk until we arrived at his house at Rongkhluab Lane. Once we arrived he told me to wait. He then disappeared into the back of the house. He returned after quite a while with a *ranard thum* (a kind of Thai xylophone) but only the body without the tone bars. He had asked my father to carve the tone bars for the instrument so I can practice at home and catch up with my classmates. This instrument was given as a favor to my mother - as he explained - “I and Jaemjan are friends, we both come from Petchaburi”. When I returned home I found that my father had already prepared the remaining part of the instrument. Thereafter, I had slowly advanced in learning the *ranard thum*. I finally passed the examination and finished my studies but I have never joined an ensemble.

This was because I preferred history and loved to listen to the

senior teachers recounting past events. I was rather inquisitive and often asked about theory and technique. Khru Prasit used to say, “This boy wants to be good in theory”. Yet my mother still wished for me to study music. She asked Khru Lamiad to teach me to play a *saw-u* (Thai violin), which I had some slight success in learning. But this was mainly due to the fact that I very much liked the old woman. Khru Lamiad was not a stern person when she was not teaching. On the contrary, she was very kind. Her lips were always red from chewing betel-nut. And best of all, she liked to tell me old stories. It seemed that my life was destined to be around old people all the time.

Everyday during afternoon break, I would go to learn *saw-u* with Khru Lamiad. Sometimes Auntie Tub would come into Khru Lamiad’s room so I asked her to accept me as her student too. During holidays I would go to Sanambinnam by bus to learn music at her home. Khru Klai (Auntie Tub) said to me, “Siripong, with your loud voice you should concentrate on singing! She once complained to my mother about this. But my mother responded: “He is much like you”. This made her very angry. She would even ask her other students “Am I loud like Siriphong?” There would be no response, only laughter, which would make her even more angry. However, her remark was apt. Auntie Tub observed that I was really emotionally charged when I was singing, but Khru Tuam did not share this opinion. He thought I was just aping my teacher. In any case, I can attribute my success in singing to her.

## **Failure**

Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> year middle class to the 1<sup>st</sup> year high class I lost my patience with studying music. I couldn’t adapt to my environment in general, and couldn’t adjust myself to the others. I felt it was my fault. From the 1<sup>st</sup> year high class onward I never attended any class of major subjects. In the morning I attended the general subject for three hours. After lunch break I attended the minor subject (drama) then left the school compound and went to stroll along the Tha Phrachan, Tha Phra Athit or Mahathat Temple just to kill time. I would always avoid certain

places and would wander like a ghost without a shrine. I would often go to see the Khon masks and teacher's heads (*srisa khru*) in the Drama and Music Division. When I became extremely bored, I would go to talk to the main Buddha Image, and to see the mural paintings. I was fortunate that I never got involved in bad habits like drugs, night clubs, or other kinds of entertainment. I never thought of going to a second-class cinema house to pass the time. I was obsessed with old places: the temples, the Drama and Music Division, the National Museum, and the Front Palace (Wang Na). These were the places where I was truly happy, and for which I still have feelings of nostalgia.

My obsession about these places gave me inspiration. I was often lost in my thoughts and dreams and I soon felt inclined to write or draw, whatever my mind would dictate. Images from past memories flashed in my mind, although I was still very young. One day I saw Arjan Sawat, the Principal of Arts school, standing under the shadow of sandalwood tree at the corner of the Green House, intensely painting a picture of the temple with oil paint. He was standing facing the temple. So I too found a piece of paper and some watercolor and tried to paint a picture. I have kept this first picture to this day. Sometimes I wondered whether or not I was strange because I found learning so boring, yet I loved to go to school. Every morning I would hurry to get dressed and went to school despite my strong dislike of learning. Other children of my age would have played truant. I myself never strayed and would go direct to school at 5.30 a.m. after getting pocket money from mother.

When I was in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the middle class, mother stopped selling her wares at school, but she would prepare food for selling at home. It was a good chance for me to go to school in the early morning. Before class I would walk among the school buildings. Some days I would have breakfast at the kitchen of the boarding section with Khru Jimlim. I walked to and fro between the Arts School and the Dance School. One day I was attracted to the room of Arjan Taem, who was teaching the students to draw a particular pattern called *lai rod nam* with which I was familiar since very young. So I drew some Thai patterns and showed it

to Arjan Taem who asked his pupils to examine my drawing. They told me even though I had not trained in this art, my work was not so bad. I could improve my skill if I tried a little harder. I was so encouraged by the words of this kind old man that I decided to become his pupil. Some days I would go to sculpture class to watch students working with clay. Slowly, these crafts became instilled into my spirit without my realizing it.

I would also often go to the Drama and Music Division to admire the Khon masks and visit the senior teachers. One day I met Arjan Akhom, the great teacher of music who asked me “Are you free tomorrow?” “Yes Sir”, I answered quickly. He said, “If you are free tomorrow, then come with me to perform the Wai Khru ceremony together”. From that time on, I would always accompany him and serve as his assistant when he performed the Wai Khru ceremony.

At the end of the 1st year of high class, I decided to leave school because I never attended any of the major subjects and felt that I could never pass the final exam. How would I be able to face my fellow students and teachers? Besides, even if I did pass the final exam, what could I accomplish as a low-quality graduate? It could only harm the school’s reputation. A music major graduate with only mediocre skill! I could not bear the thought of being a music graduate without quality. Even though my school years were long ago, I still have nightmares about them. Some nights I dream that I am walking in the school building but I could not find my classroom. All my friends are looking at me as if I were a strange animal. I also dream that I cannot catch up with my friends. Some times I dream that I am sitting in an examination for the playing of an instrument. I watch my friends play, and when my turn comes, I simply run away. Then suddenly I wake up. These nightmares have never gone away. Every time I was about to forget them, they kept coming back. It has badly affected my health. I have to be under the doctor’s care all the time. I need medication for heart problems, high-blood pressure and diabetes in order to live a normal life. I also need to follow a strict regimen of food and sugar. I often wondered if I could ever be as happy as my classmates or other people of my age.

## A Period of Brightening

Owing to my inquisitive mind and my enjoyment in talking with people, I learned and experienced many new things. After accompanying Arjan Akhom to perform the Wai Khru ceremonies, we would often take a rest and I would ask him many things which he would patiently explain to me. I liked to ask questions.

Normally, mother would have Wai Khru ceremony on the fifth day of the waxing moon, in the fifth lunar month every year. When the thatched-roof home was taken down and two new two-storey houses were built, the big one was used as a living quarter and the small one for offering food to monks and for the Wai Khru ceremony. Mother's most venerated teachers were Luangphor Wat Khaotakhrao and Thao Phromakan. Mother told me that these two monks have held an intimate place in our family since the time of our ancestors. An altar covered with white cloth was placed on the floor below the picture of Luang Phor Khaotakhrao. There was no idol on the altar. Mother would put on this altar a photo of a "teacher's head" taken during the Wai Khru ceremony at Sala Phra Ruang, pictures of Mom Khru, Khru Luang Vilat, Khru Luang Bamrung. After Khru Mun passed away, mother would add Khru Mun's picture on the altar which she cut from the Funeral book. There were various propitiatory offerings including those for the guardian spirits (Chao Tii). Each year there would be six cooked hog heads and one raw one especially for Phra Phirap (a form of Bhairava Shiva and lord of the dance). There were also raw internal organs of the whole hog put on a large tray. And another yak servant named Rhak Sot (who my mother claimed is also a teacher) who is offered a raw sacrifice.

After the ceremony, mother would use these offerings to make food for selling. Since there were many hog heads, mother would cook them in different ways. She would prepare *kaeng buan* from those internal organs which I did not like because of its sweet taste. Every time mother prepared *kaeng buan*, I would be assigned to pound the *bael* leaves, lemongrass leaves, and other types of leaves in order to get juices for *kaeng buan*. I once asked mother why she never told anybody when she

had a Wai Khru ceremony. She would answer that since it was to honor our own teachers, we should hold the ceremony ourselves. She explained that we were fortunate to this day because our teachers protected us. Besides, these ritual offerings did not go to waste. Mother would use them to make food for selling and the money she received she considered to be the fruit of her merit. Mother's Wai Khru ceremonies were always simple. In the morning food was offered to the monks, then the offerings were arranged in proper places. Mother would wear a white dress with white sash diagonally on her shoulder. She made this outfit by herself. After lighting joss sticks to worship the gods and the gathering angels, she would close her eyes and silently pray for a while. Then she would place the joss sticks at the offerings, pour the liquor, peel the skin of fruits, pour sauce on hog's heads, duck and chicken, then wait until the joss sticks expired. After that she would put some offerings on young banana leaves and place them on both the left and right sides of the land outside the fence. After this ritual the ceremony was considered over.

When I was in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the middle class, we held the Wai Khru ceremony at home. Mother showed me a funeral souvenir book (the 6<sup>th</sup> hundred-day rite) of Phraya Aniruthdeva and asked me to read for her. She told me to read from a specific part used to pay respect to the teachers. From that day on I always performed the reading part for my mother. Before we would pay respect to the teachers, mother would ask me to make offerings. She also reminded me not to forget to pay homage to the Emerald Buddha. She explained to me, "The Emerald Buddha granted me a child. I was married to your father for many years and all the time we could not have baby. So we decided to petition the Emerald Buddha in the Grand Palace to give us a child". I have been following her instructions for these ceremonies ever since.

During the time I was serving Arjan Akhom, Pii (brother) Songtham was also helping. Songtham is one of the teacher's first group of students. He was in the military service but came to help the teacher whenever he had free time. Pii Songtham was an expert in amulets. One day after returning from the Wai Khru ceremony, before we left the Arjan

Akhom's house, he said to us, "Songtham is good in making amulets/votive tablets, but Noo (Siriphong) would be good at making Khon masks, since you show so much interest in the craft." A week later, the teacher sent Pii Mun to fetch me and we went to see the teacher at the Drama and Music Division. The Arjan Akhom said "No, I have asked Khru Chit to make a small Khon mask for me. If you have time, go to his house and ask him to speed it up". Khru Chit's house was in the Ban Batr area, in a lane to the left just across the fire-work bridge. Initially I went there once a week. But eventually I began walking there everyday after class. At that time, Khru Chit had many orders on hand and he could not produce them fast enough to meet the demand. Whenever someone came to his house to check on the progress of the work they ordered, Khru Chit would pick up the unfinished work and continue working on it. But when the person was gone, he would set it aside. I was there to watch him so he would finish our piece, but I would also observe him, examining his work, and touching each piece of work carefully. After going back home I would try to do it myself. There were only two techniques I did not know, namely how to carve the soap stone model and the lacquer plate joining formula.... But finally I got the two formulae from Pii Toy who kindly gave me every detail.

Since I did not complete my music study course, I had to commission Khru Chit to make the "teacher's heads" (*srisa khru*) for me. The Rishi and Phra Phirap heads cost 5,000 baht for the pair. They were my first pair of teacher's heads made by Khru Chit Kaewduangyai. Khru Akhom performed the eye-opening ceremony of the teachers' heads, and used them to initiate both the host and the guests at the home of Khru Weera Limpraphan (a Radio Drama 213 producer at that time). This took place on Thursday, 25 November 1976. Pii Mun and I were his assistants. After "initiating" all the others, I was also "initiated" and became the rightful owner of "the teacher's heads". It was through his kindness that I could have made it this far. I wondered how many have been as fortunate as I was. These "teacher's heads" have become my most special models which I return to up until this day. Khru Akhom not only

taught me how to make Khon masks, but he also molded me into what I am today. He really made a sacrifice for me when he commissioned Khru Chit to make the Khon masks in order that I could learn from him. This teacher taught me both directly and indirectly. He gave me a new life.

***Teacher, you were an artist who was wise and discerning.***

***You could make worthless soil valuable.***

***In deep gratitude for your kindness.***

***You will always be in my memory:***

***Phokhru Akhom Sayakom.***

After I left school for some time, I decided to enter monkhood. Both the ordination and Wai Khru ceremony were held together on 24 March 1977. The teacher came to perform the Wai Khru ceremony at my house. The next day I was ordained at Wat Thongnophakhun. After the end of Buddhist lent, I left the monkhood. My father became seriously ill and passed away. The following year I also lost my grandmother. I then lived with my mother who still carried on with her trade. It was a more independent life. After spending some time involved in the family enterprise, I began to feel bored with my life.

One day Arjan Prakhob sent for me through Mr. Prawit. I went to see Arjan at school the following day. “Noo, the Sueksaphan Stationery Store sent me a letter saying that they have vacancy in their Music Section and they want to recruit a music graduate to fill this post. I think you are the most suitable person, and I want you to apply for this job. I have not yet told anybody else about this vacancy”. So I then landed a job in the Sueksaphan Stationery Store. I was trained in the sixth group and was assigned to be at the front of the shop. There I met a lot of people, including my former fellow students both senior and junior who had become teachers in various schools. Friends began to send their pupils to me for additional lessons. I accepted many who came for additional music or singing lessons. (Since I had become a teacher myself, I felt I could not be complacent. I had to improve and acquire more knowledge). And

since I was a very slow student myself, and had to work hard to catch up with my other classmates, I could understand the student's difficulties more than their own teachers at schools.

This was very much appreciated by the students who later brought their friends to take lessons at my house. I realized that even as a teacher one cannot stop learning. I had to go to Khru Prasit to learn music in order to teach my students. I was learning and teaching at the same time. This lasted 2 years. Everything was going well. I also found the way to increase my income. Khru Juree brought us her music theory books to sell in our family shop. Mr. Sophon, an alumnus of Ban Somdet College, a flute maker, also brought us his very soft sounding flutes for selling as well. At that time, flute-playing was very popular. Each month flute turnover was quite considerable, and students would ask for a flute manual but there were not many books on music available in those days. For this purpose I was the first to write a flute manual and offer it for sale at Sueksaphan Stationery Store (My pen-name was Saenkhamnueng). My flute manual was selling well and has been popular ever since. I have been in monkhood for 15 years and this book has been reprinted many times. Word had spread that anyone who wanted to learn to play flute, she/he should use the manual written by Saenkhamnueng.

### **The Serious Making of Khon Masks**

My income from various sources enabled me to have extra money to commission Khru Chit to make a Pho Khru mask. At the same time a Phra Phrot Muni mask of the Drama and Music Division was also sent to me for repairing. The teacher used to wear this mask when he danced at the Wai Khru ceremony. Therefore, I asked Pii Toy to make a duplicate for me. Everyday after the work in Sueksaphan Stationery Store, I walked to Banbatr Lane to watch and to learn how to make Khon masks until I could do it myself. Then something happened which made me feel again extremely bored with life, so I decided to quit my job.

After my resignation from work I entered the monkhood again. I was ordained at a temple near my house in order to properly take care

of my mother. One year after ordination I finished the dharma studies. In my free time, I used to walk along the various living cells of monks. I met a novice trying to draw picture. From looking at his work I could tell that he had talent and his skill could be developed if he received proper guidance. So I asked the novice, "Would you like to draw better pictures?" His answer was affirmative. So I asked permission from the abbot to transfer this novice to come to live with me. I relentlessly mentored him for 3 years, teaching him from my own experience. I hired a car to take the novice to Petchburi to see with his own eyes how they make the *pun pan* (molded lime plaster), to Ayutthya to see the Buddha image at the Nah Phra Meru temple, and to see the mural paintings at the Emerald Buddha Temple. After breakfast, equipped with lots of drawing paper, we would go to the National Museum and draw the various Khon masks and teacher's heads (*srisa khru*), copying every design that we liked. I tried very hard to awaken in him an enthusiasm for fine art workmanship. Every evening after 6 p.m., we would begin work. As his teacher, if I felt sleepy I could sleep, but as student he could not do so, he had to carry on with his work. I used to wake up in the middle of the night to inspect and correct the novice's work. Then at around 3 a.m. we both went back to sleep again. This was our daily activity. It is now widely known that whoever comes to Wat Suttharam to attend the nightly prayer at a funeral there would drop in to see our works at the Prachachonneramit 2 living cell. Consequently we were commissioned to make many orders, and both the monk teacher and his novice were kept very busy. Our first piece of work was a plaster block model, of a bust of Crown Prince Maha Vajirunhis. The second was a bust of King Phra Pinklao and the third was a bust of Phra Phrot Muni. Later we ventured to make a full-size body of Phra Pikhanet, Phra Trimurti, Phra Phrot Muni, Phra Phirap and Phra Uma. Each of these five models were 2 metres high.

But our first Khon mask lacked the proper design. It was a mask of Phra Phirap, painted with *Rak* tree sap, and made without the use of a mould. After we finished we invited Pii Toy to have a look at it. She neither criticized nor suggested any modifications, she only said, "It is

passable, but it looks a bit more like female *yak*. You and your pupil would have more success in making *yaks* than making monkeys”.

After Pii Toy left, the novice and myself intensified our efforts. We wanted to make a clay model of a Hanuman mask just to prove that our teacher was wrong. After the finishing touch we brought this mask to her. Unfortunately, she had already moved out from Banbatr to Bang Gruay area, so we braved the heavy rain and took a Tuk Tuk belonging to Nai Daeng to her house. Pii Toy inspected our work and then said, “I still think it is half-monkey, half-yak”. From then on we stopped attempting to make monkey masks. We concentrated on making yak masks, Buddha images and the teacher’s heads.

One day we went to visit Pii Toy when she gave us some soap-stone which the Chinese used for making ink. She encouraged us to keep practicing for she was confident that we could do it. We were very grateful to her in not giving us the ready sculpted soap-stone because so we could sculpt it ourselves. As we wished to overcome our own self-hindrance, we groped for the right form by trial and error. We had no proper tools and had to make do with a sharp-pointed knife and the sharpened point of a compass to slowly carve the soap-stone, and then use oil-clay to test the mould. We kept trying until we were satisfied with the mould. We made a Phra Phirap teacher’s head with sandal wood powder, molded with carved designs, with *Rachawadi* to create the color. Then we added the fangs and wooden dowels to support the back part of the skull. The finished work was then submitted to Pii Toy for inspection. When she saw it she smiled saying “Is it not true as I told you before? From carving on soap-stone and experimenting with oil-clay models, you certainly have developed your workmanship”.

After that we began working on different models: tiny Buddha images, tiny Khon mask and teacher’s head amulets and many others. We are the first people who made tiny metal teacher’s head models to be used as pendants. They were so popular that many gurus began to make their auspicious objects in the form of Rishi, even fakers in the Tha Phra Chan amulet market copied both my tiny Rishi, Phra Phirap, and

mass-produced them for selling. One day Ajarn Praphan Sukkhonthachat proudly showed me one piece which he bought from a road-side stall. Then I showed him the original soap-stone model and told him that it was my own work. Our votive tablets have also become very popular among amulet lovers. For example a Rishi, a Phra Phirap on a coconut shell, a Rishi on a metal coin, and even a teacher's head tattoo design.

From being an only child playing with soil, to becoming a Khon mask craftsman, I can say without reservation that I owe my success to my teachers. My achievement is due to my wonderful teachers and not to myself alone.

My novice had been ordained according to the tradition and eventually left the monkhood and has a family of his own. He has used the skill acquired while he was being trained to earn a living to support his family. He did not attend any craft or art school. He has no degree. But what the novice and his teacher have both acquired is much more significant than a mere piece of paper showing accreditation. Whatever he and I have today is the result of our dedicating our lives for it through trial and error which earned for both of us a special degree: a "Degree of Life".

*The benevolent teacher is much like the great Ganges River,  
Since it eternally flows and never ceases.  
Ten fingers rise in the gesture of prayer,  
To honor the benevolent teacher with pure heart.*

### **Honoring the Mother**

On June 13, 1988, at the age of 85, my mother passed away. Before she died, she had agreed to sponsor the annual robe-presentation (Kathin) ceremony at the temple where I was ordained. Since she died before this occasion, my students and myself had to take over. Mother's funeral was simple but with deep devotion. I did not have to search for a *piphat* ensemble, my students took care of this and they played for her every night. Everything was done according to her wishes. Red was her

favorite color, so we decorated everything in red except for the coffin and the decorative items upon it. Mother used a red tablecloth when she was selling her wares. Even her fingernails were always painted red. She never allowed her grey-hair to be seen, or allow her red nail polish to be chipped, even when she was admitted to hospital.

I have not been in touch with the school for quite some time. After mother died, I asked my juniors to inform “The Chinese Empress” (Arjan Pranee) about the news. The next day she came to pay respect to the body. She also presided over the cremation ceremony and lighted the fire herself. During the time she attended the nightly prayers, she spoke about her close relationship with mother and father to my students. I brought “The Chinese Empress” to my living quarters and showed her how I lived. When we entered the gate, she saw so many cats both living and artificial. There were cat pictures on the walls, even in the bathroom. The “Chinese Empress” was quite happy to find that we have something in common. I also took her to my house and showed her my works. She also liked my works. Later my students and I paid her a visit at her home. After we returned, my students commented that I resembled “the Chinese Empress” in many ways. We share the same interests and even the same favorite color. I told my students that since we both were born on Saturday, we even suffer similar kind of illnesses.

Through her sympathetic understanding, I regained the courage to fight against a dangerous disease. I dared to consult her about everything. Whenever I became ill, she kindly phoned often and enquired after my condition. She also remarked that whenever she became ill, it was often the case that I was also admitted to hospital. Hence when she was ill, she often thought about me. This kind of warmth has been lacking from my life for so long. “The Chinese Empress” was a godsend who brought me back to life. She replenished the oil in the lamp, changed its wick, and wound it up again. My morale began to improve and I began to think about showing gratitude to my school, and to the Front Place land. I consulted “the Chinese Empress” about this matter and mentioned to her my intention to make a Rishi and a Phra Phirap teacher’s head for the school. I asked

“the Chinese Empress” to secure permission from the school director to let me make them for school on the condition that the presentation would be kept simple, unofficial and without any acknowledgement letter. First, I began to work on the Rishi and had finished the face painting and eye-opening rite in the Wai Khru ceremony at the temple on the first anniversary of my mother’s death. The two works were combined to one occasion. “The Chinese Empress” was kind enough to light the victory candles, participated in Wai Khru ceremony, and received my Rishi teacher’s head as school representative. I consider this my ultimate success. The day “the Chinese Empress” accepted my Rishi teacher’s head was my graduation. It meant that I completed my education, and arrived at the day of my life achievement. “The Chinese Empress” was my first teacher who saw the potential in me – she was strict and she scolded me, but out of her good wishes. Early in my life she saw me taking soil and dust to make a Rishi head. And now it is her hands that extend to receive the highest development of that initial piece of soil. It is a kind of education and success that has slowly come to fruition.

I would like students to contemplate my kind of life as a lesson. Do not expect anyone under your charge to be merely as you wish them to be. Be open-minded and give them an opportunity to follow their own heart’s desire. Simply watch them grow and be a good mentor to them. Guide them on until they reach the star of their dreams.

### **An Opportunity Arises for Honoring a Teacher**

On 14 March 2001 I received an invitation to hold an exhibition of Khon masks and teacher’s heads at Princess Sirindhorn Music Library (in the National Library) on the occasion of the Thai heritage Conservation Day. I met the Chief of the Music Library to discuss the necessary arrangements. I also let him know that I was most willing to accept the invitation provided that I would be allowed to hold a simultaneous exhibition in honor of our teacher: Arjan Arkom. This was his 84<sup>th</sup> anniversary birthday. This teacher is no ordinary teacher. He is an expert in Khon dance-drama, authorized to perform the Initiation Rite for Khon

performers, and can bequeath his authority to other teachers. He is an initiating teacher who has directly inherited the ritual of the initiation rite for royal Khon performers, which has been handed down from the beginning of Ratanakosin Era. This teacher also received a sacred thread directly from the hands of H.M. King Bhumibol who graciously appointed him to perform the Wai Khru ceremony for the royal audience. And he has many important works to his credit: including Khon dance-drama, music, folk-songs, radio drama scripts and Thai modern songs. The National Library official readily agreed to my request. The exhibition was scheduled to run from 29 March to 30 April. However the National Library had no budget to support my plan; they could only provide space and program printing. So I had to find both money and man power to realize this plan. Fortunately, my students took care of the necessary expenditure and temple boys pooled their strength to transport all the exhibition items. One day before the exhibition opened, I arranged for a religious ceremony, inviting monks to chant and offering them food, the merit gained was offered to teacher and the guardian spirit of the National Library.

The Director General of The Fine Arts Department, Mr. Arvuth Ngoenchuklin, presided over the opening ceremony, accompanied by Vice-Directors General Mr. Weera and Mr. Sirichaichan. The Director General was much interested in my works. After the ceremony, we discussed about technical knowledge for quite a while. Before he left, he even asked the Chief Librarian and other staff members to take good care of me because he had heard about my poor health and my hospitalization during the preparation work.

During the exhibition, I had to be at the Music Library and meet visitors. I was allowed to use “Than Phuying Puangroi” room as office. The exhibition was quite successful. Both senior and junior student friends came to view the exhibition and gave words of encouragement. There were many requests for extension of the exhibition time since it was also school holidays, so the National Library extended the exhibition until 30 June. From the visitors’ book, there were more than 30,000 people who came to view the exhibition.

October 2001, I had the chance of arranging another exhibition in honour of Arjan Arkom again at the Princess Sirindhorn Music Library. It was the birth month of his 84th anniversary. Arjan Rewadee was very kind to bring some of his personal items for the exhibition that he received from the King. These included the sacred thread given by H.M. King Bhumibol, a Srisa Por Khru Rishi, a Phra Phirap Srisa Khru, a headress of the Nora Chatri (a character from southern Thai dance drama), a case containing a Deva Rup Long Song, a sacred text used in the initiation rite of Khon and Lakhon, a staff handed down from Phraya Natakanurak (Thongdee Suvanpharot), a Srisa Por Khru Rishi and Phra Phirap Srisa Khru that were used when initiating Princess Sirindhorn. I consider this event the greatest success of my life. I could honor my teacher and could help revive the memory of those who used to be his students, his close friends, his acquaintances and the general public, who were mesmerized by his dancing and the tone of his voice. I put a big exhibition poster in front of the National Library: **“Exhibition in Honor of Phor Khru Akhom Sayakhom, Master Teacher of the Ratanakosin Era.”**

On Wednesday, 24 October, I was given the award of a Master of the Arts (Sartrmedhee). Also, on 26 October was Ajarn Akhom’s 84<sup>th</sup> birthday. I arranged for a merit-making ceremony for both events at King Rama IX Music Library. The Director-General Mr. Arvuth Ngoenchuklin was very kind to preside over the ceremonies.

### **Causes lead to Effects**

After the exhibition at Princess Sirindhorn Music Library ended, I packed up the exhibit items and had another exhibition at the temple for one month since the time coincided with birthdays of the Former Abbot and myself. According to the visitors’ book, there were altogether 1285 visitors. On 22 August 2001 I received a letter from Mom Luang Pin Malakul Foundation saying that I have been chosen to receive the Master of the Arts (Sartrmedhee) for the year 2001, in the category of Thai Art, Khon mask making. There were altogether 6 awardees.

During the exhibition at the Music Library, Police Major-General

Suchart Phuerksakon, Secretary General and Committee member of Phra Dabot Project, asked me to design and to build Phra Dabot statue to be presented to H.M. the King who would in turn give the statue to the Phra Dabot Foundation. I agreed to do as requested. I molded a figure using sandal wood powder as an ingredient.

After I finished the job and the necessary Wai Khru Ceremony done, I exhibited my work temporarily at the Princess Sirindhorn Music Library. On 21 May 2002, I had an audience with Her Royal Highness Princess Chulaphorn Walailuk and presented my work to Her Royal Highness who acted as representative of H.M. the King.

Around the end of 2000, I began to feel weak, my fingertips and my feet were beginning to feel numb. The doctor advised me of sleep at least 10 hours a day. I was also advised to eat more often, but less quantity each meal. But I did not follow the doctor's instruction. As a result I began to experience increasing numbness in my hands and they began to shake, I eventually lost control of the use of my hands. I could no longer hold a pencil, use brushes or even write. I had to stop working on Phra Dabot. During some sleepless nights, Mr. Jack came to help prepare the sandalwood powder. Chao Kaew came to help with decorations. For these tasks, I required help from my students. I myself could only provide some finishing touches and details. Later on I became allergic to glue paste and sandal wood powder. The fine dust that lodged under my fingernails was the cause of my swollen hands which needed medical treatment. I had to stop working temporarily. Chao Kaew took over to complete the unfinished tasks. My students asked me to stop working completely. They wanted me to rest. But how could I? This is against my character. There were so many plans I had to give up. The spirit is often willing but the body will not cooperate. I could only pray that I would regain my energy and my capability so that I could continue to create.

No matter whether the past is right or wrong, it has already been recorded in the memory as Mr. Chok Chomthawat's poem says:

*One day is one page in our own history,  
All our past events are recorded in this history,  
Just open the page and read it if you want to reminisce,  
But don't ever taint it or tarnish it.  
(Chok Chomthawat, 25 June 2002)*

### **Accepting Students for a Great Task**

About the beginning of the year 2004, my health had considerably improved, but I still felt a little weak. Five boys came to see me and asked me to teach them how to make Khon masks. I decided to accept them, but wanted to assess their seriousness and their patience first. I then asked them to stay at the temple while I took care of their living expenses. I began with the basic groundwork just that I underwent myself at the beginning of my own apprenticeship. After a trial period of one month, only one student could pass this acid test. This student was seriously interested in the craft and could follow every instruction of mine. Hence, I resumed my Khon mask and teacher's head (*srisa khru*) making, and assigned this accepted student (Jesada Saratn) to make a Rishi teacher's head, while I myself would make a Black Shiva (Phra Phrairava). After Jesada had been with me for three months, we planned to create the world biggest mask of Rishi. We followed the ancient customs in every step. We never used modern ingredients or tools, (no casting). We pasted layers of papier maché over a mould, just as in the making of any ordinary-sized Khon masks. This work was completed at the end of December 2004. Its width from right ear to left ear was 169 cm, its height from his chin to the top of his headdress was 205 cm, and its diameter was 320 cm. We had a celebration on 7 January 2005. This event was telecast on TV Channel 7 under the program "Sakheth Khao" on the night of celebration.

The first day of March 2005, I began to make both the world smallest and the world's largest Phra Phirap; the largest has 270 cm width and 170 cm height. After completion, I had my work exhibited at King Rama IX Music Library and Princess Sirindhorn Music Library, in the compound of the National Library, with the title "Phra Phirap Exhibition".

This exhibition was to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday Anniversary of Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. The exhibition opened on 9 July 2005. Phra Chao Krung Jeen (Chinese Empress) presided over the ceremonies and lighted the candle and joss sticks in homage to Phra Phirap. Mr. Arak Sunghitkul, Director General of the Fine Arts Department, delivered an opening speech. The National Library was responsible for publishing the Phra Phirap Song Book. I myself wrote a book about Phra Phirap. This book describes the origin of Phra Phirap and the process of making Phra Phirap teacher's heads. I also made auspicious objects (*watthumongkol*) in the form of Phra Phirap Srisa Khru and Phra Phirap amulets moulded from powder, to be given to the visitors to the exhibition.

The event was quite successful and gained much publicity through its television broadcast. A lot of people came to view the exhibition. The "Chinese Empress" helped a great deal in making my name better known. Students from different institutes came to interview me and asked about the process I used in making Khon masks.

At the moment there were plenty of work to be done, and little time to rest. I had to go to the hospital every week. The "Chinese Empress" herself was also not so well. She felt weak. If I had not contacted her for one week, she would phone to enquire after my health. She said she was worried about my infirmity, I also reciprocated her concern. Whenever I felt a little stronger, I would pay her a visit at her school. I would cook her favorite dishes and had temple boys take them to her. Sometimes I would also prepare my favorite dishes for her.

Whenever I went to the Princess Sirindhorn Music Library I would drop in at school to see the "Chinese Empress". After some time she would scold me for taking too much trouble while both of us were not so strong and healthy. I told her it made me happy to do what I did. She did not say a word but continued to accept the food which I had prepared for her. My visit to the school became more frequent and noticeable. One day I happened to bump into Arjan Praphiphan Sriphen when I was leaving the office of the "Chinese Empress". She never missed a chance of

making a joke and said, “Pranee (the real name of the Chinese Empress) seems to be only your relative over here!” I laughed and quickly denied it, although I was deeply fond of the “Chinese Empress” and felt deep affinity with her (Arjan Praphitphan and my mother were relatives. They used to have meals together; they consulted and spoke with one other all the time). “The Chinese Empress” is a friend of Arjan Praphitphan. After leaving school Arjan Praphitphan got married to Pii Tia, but the “Chinese Empress” remained single. My house and the “Chinese Empress’s” were close to each other so our relationship was also close. The “Chinese Empress” was a dignified person with an awe-inspiring personality. She often made this remark to me: “How very odd that a monk should have closer relationship with me than with Praphaiphit (who was his relative)”.

After that incident of chance meeting, Arjan Praphaiphit came to visit me more often either at the temple or at the Princess Sirindhorn Music Library. Hence I felt obliged to fulfill my duty as a younger brother by sending 2 sets of gifts to the Administration Building and to the school auditorium respectively.

Gifts are only accessories, but the feelings of affection and good wishes behind the gifts are what is most significant. Since October 2005, the “Chinese Empress” was often admitted to hospital. She often complained about her lack of appetite and body pain. Every time she phoned me she would repeatedly remind me to carefully take care of myself. After the New Year 2006, she was again hospitalized, but we still kept our contact by phone. We both lied to each other. She would say her condition was not serious, and I would assure her of my own good health. During the time she was hospitalized in the Centenary Year Building, Siriraj Hospital, I was also admitted to another hospital. Arjan Rewadee Sayakhom phoned me in the morning of 9 February 2006 gasping: “Rush to the hospital (Siriraj) quickly, Somsak told me that the teacher (Chinese Empress) is waiting for you. She is concerned about you”. This frightened me since it was only 15 days to the “Chinese Empress’s” birthday anniversary. I mustered up strength and frantically dashed from one hospital to another. I arrived at the Centenary Year Building at about 5 p.m. After getting out of the lift, I saw

so many of my senior and junior school-fellows were heading towards the “Chinese Empress’s” room. Filled with dread, I came to realize that everyone came to bid their last farewell to the teacher. She was sleeping when I entered the room, her body covered with a mauve blanket – her favorite colour. I could hear the soft sound of the prayer “Chinabanchorn Khatha” coming from the radio near her bed. I moved closer to the bed. Arjan Somsak bent over and whispered in her ear, “Mother, Noo is here”. The “Chinese Empress” moved her hand and turned towards me. I and Arjan Nittaya Jamornmarn looked at each other across the bed. We both could not hold back our tears. The atmosphere in the room was deadly quiet - as if to let the sound from the heart of each student to resound before the last breath of their most beloved and revered teacher. I stood in a trance for almost one hour, until one of my students came to whisper in my ear urging me to return since I myself was also unwell. I did not return to my hospital as earlier intended but went direct to the temple in order to pray for the “Chinese Empress”. Before I left the hospital, I asked Arjan Somsak to keep me informed. That night I did not go to bed; I just sat and prayed for her. At 8 o’ clock the next day, I received a phone call from Arjan Somsak saying “Mother (teacher) has just passed away peacefully - she shuddered a little before breathing her last breath. When I was standing near her hospital bed, I happened to see a garland and a white envelope on a table beside her bed. In the envelope she had put money for her funeral. She had prepared everything because she did not want to burden anyone with her death. She had also donated her body for medical education. At first the hospital refused to accept because it was found that she had cancer. I had to petition the hospital to accept her body because I wanted to see her wish fulfilled.”

The “Chinese Empress” was born on 24 February 1933 and died on 10 February 2006. She was just a few days short of the age of 73. I went to wait for her body at Wat Tri Thosathep. During the preparation for the “water pouring” rite, Arjan Praphitphan handed me a large garland saying, “Reverend, please take this to your sister. The three of us had promised to take care of each other but could not do so. When Arjan Pranee (the

real name of the “Chinese Empress”) was hospitalized I also had my eyes operated upon and Reverend was also in the hospital”. I was speechless and could only nod. Arjan Rewadee Sayakhom kindly made it known to others that I should be the first person to perform the *water pouring rite* since I had to hurry back to my hospital. I placed the garland of one sister on the body of another sister with great sadness.

In a small mauve booklet in memory of the “Chinese Empress” Funeral, the following message was printed:

In dedication to Arjan Pranee Samranwong, a most beloved teacher. A teacher who had devoted her energy, her heart and spirit for the merit of being a good teacher (Khru).

*Although the earthly candle-flame begins to flicker out,  
Your light still shines brightly in the sky,  
This is the light of the great teacher that continually guides me,  
Even through my next life.*

*Luk Nattasin*

Her body had been donated for educational purposes. Even though she may be forever gone, however far away she may be, the thought of her is still alive in our memory and its freshness will not fade away.

There was also a short paragraph copied from a book published on the special occasion of the Dance and Music College giving a short biography and explanation of the work of Arjan Pranee Samranwong when she was Director of the school:

During my tenure as Director, I had a strong desire to develop this Dance School which I so love in every way, especially the part of learning and teaching. Although I am heavily burdened with school administration and development, I cannot abandon teaching. Up to this day, I still repeatedly remind my students of my intention to see students practice the following principles: “Practice good

conduct, be disciplined, have a thirst for knowledge, uphold the arts and crafts, make sacrifices and remain united.”

Just over one month after the death of the “Chinese Empress,” Arjan Bunnag (Ngae) Thanthranont came to visit me. Upon seeing that my health had improved, she said she wanted to tell me some sad news. She told me that Arjan Praphitphan passed away about a month after Arjan Pranee. She fell over the temple verandah. She died after a few days in hospital. Everybody kept this sad news from me not only because of my poor health but also the traumatic shock I had experienced when Arjan Pranee passed away. I was stunned and could not utter a word. I suddenly experienced a flashback – an image of the funeral at Wat Tri Thosatthep. Now the two loving friends who had promised once to care for one another would now be together and live happily in heaven. Sooner or later my turn will definitely come. I fully hope to meet again the beings who had played the roles of Suvarnahong and the Chinese Empress here on earth.

**Life is a drama, a play of both happiness and sadness,  
Lovers meet, and at the end of the scene, are separated.  
Nothing remains, everything passes on.**

*Siriphong Kharuphankit*