He who wants nothing of either this world or the next, who is desire-free and emancipated – him, do I call a holy man.

*Dhp 410*

# A Life Expired

*The Death of Luang Por Chah*

## A Death

The twentieth of January, 1983. At the small provincial airport of Ubon Ratchathani in northeast Thailand, a group of Buddhist monks and lay supporters look up to the sky. Nearby them, a white ambulance is parked on the runway.

### Preparations

The Wat Pah Pong Sangha had been preparing for this funeral since the early years of Luang Por’s illness. At first, there had been some voices of dissent – one or two of the more elderly monks grumbled that preparing for someone’s death usually brought it closer – but the consensus was that a funeral of the magnitude they anticipated required long preparation. It was clear that the major buildings in the monastery were in need of replacement or renovation. Toilet facilities were far from sufficient for a large gathering. A cremation site would have to be designated and prepared, and a stupa to house Luang Por’s relics would need to be built. A new and comprehensive biography of Luang Por should be produced[[1]](#footnote-2) and a huge number of smaller books of his teachings would need to be published as gifts for all the guests. There were enough funds in the monastery account to begin what needed to be done, and more would surely start to flow in as lay supporters became aware of the various projects planned. They applied themselves to their tasks in the way they had been taught: one step at a time.

In a meeting of the Sangha Elders, it was decided that the cremation should take place on the northern side of the monastery, in the newer, more open area between the Nursing Kuti where Luang Por had spent his last years and the new Maechee[[2]](#footnote-3) Section. Earth was brought in by a seemingly endless convoy of lorries to raise the level of the site. Thousands of trees were planted around it (fertilized by human excrement provided by the municipality – Ajahn Liem’s much-criticized idea that proved triumphantly successful in promoting rapid growth on extremely poor soil). The monks built a concrete road stretching from the inner monastery gate out to, and around, the cremation site – a total distance of some two kilometres. The work took nearly a year of workdays from mid-morning to dusk and often until late into the night. The younger monks did the heavy work, lifting the bags of cement into the mixer and spreading the concrete on the road; the older monks squatted on their haunches making rebar.

### After Dark

The night of the cremation. The wind is blustering through the amplification system and the temperature has dropped steeply. Luang Ta Maha Bua, disregarding his own ill-health, discourses from the Dhamma seat set up on the western entrance to the stupa, illuminated by the spotlights that play upon it. He urges his listeners to uphold the traditions and practices taught by Luang Por Chah. Ajahn Sumedho, Luang Por’s senior Western disciple, continues the theme.

And the guiding principle to be relied on in each of them is the generation of wisdom and ‘rightness’[[3]](#footnote-4). ‘Rightness’ means Right View and is another word for wisdom.

The majority of people have returned to their homes by now.[[4]](#footnote-5) The fifty thousand or so that remain are the hard core – wrapped in shawls and blankets, they will stay throughout the night, listening to Dhamma talks and meditating. Tan Chao Khun Debvedi speaks of how Luang Por exemplified the qualities of a ‘good friend’: his warmth and care; his ability to instill respect and confidence in the teachings; his inspirational example; the way he taught and exhorted and instructed; his patience in dealing with his students’ inadequacies and doubts; his ability to explain profound matters in clear ways; his absolute integrity in his dealings with his students.

1. In fact, two biographies were written, both for free distribution. The main volume, *Upalamani* was a large hardback book with many photographs. A much-abbreviated paperback book was also produced for general distribution. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. White-robed nun. See Glossary, FIXME:pageref. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In Thai: ความถูกต้อง [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. State funerals are divided into two stages. Most guests attend only the first stage, which ends with the donation of the ceremonial flame and the placing of the ‘sandalwood flowers’. In most funerals, the actual cremation will take place a little later and only be attended by close family and friends. In this case, the cremation was set for midnight. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)