

Going For Broke

Composed by Bhikkhu S.

Edited by Steve Scena

For My Family and Friends

Going for Broke

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Bhikkhu S. requests that those who know his full monk's name not reveal it.

The URLs given for web sites were accurate at the time of publication.

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Editor's Note

Were it not for a broken coffee maker, I might never have met Bhikkhu S. I was staying at the Pa-Auk Forest Monastery in Myanmar, the latest stop on my on-and-off journey to try to become a good Buddhist and meditator. I was sitting alone in a small downstairs kitchen where lay yogis ate, feeling sleepy after the 11 a.m. meal, the last of a day that began at 3:30 a.m. I think I was dozing off when I opened my eyes to see a white monk at the coffee urn. He'd come down because the one in the hall above wasn't working. We immediately started talking. He was friendly, open, and happy, even eager to answer my questions. I figured that as one of the few non-Asian monks out of hundreds (and, I think, the only American) he was bound to have an interesting story. As indeed he did.

Over the next half hour or so he explained how 15 years before he'd quit his job to travel and decide whether to pursue his long-time goal of becoming a monk. His trip had interesting adventures, including an arrest, a coup d'état, and a thrilling moment on a beach when he (literally) found what he was looking for. The story is told here in more detail, with insight and humor, in the letters he wrote along the way.

I was taken by him and his story, above all by how he'd left a comfortable life and had actually made his dream come true. I'd tried to do the same in my own way with much less resolve and success. Older than he, I was still trying to realize my dreams and find my place in the world. I hadn't even been able to stay on a Buddhist path, and here he'd become a monk. He'd found in Buddhism and meditation the joy and the meaning of which I'd only had glimmers.

At the end of that meeting – it was time to begin the four-hour afternoon meditation period– he told me he'd compiled his travel letters into a book he planned to publish. I offered to help, not really imagining I could since I was leaving soon and it might be hard to keep in touch.

He came to see me after lunch again, gave me his email address and files from his thumb drive, and over the next months we worked long distance to prepare the book for publishing. In editing I've tried to keep his writing style, checking spelling and grammar, clarifying points, and removing unneeded words to make the book easier to read.

In early chapters you will sometimes see all capital letters. The notes were originally written in basic unformatted text and all caps had to be used for emphasis. On Bhikkhu S.'s

suggestion, I have left them to retain the nostalgia of that style of writing. I've added web links for some of the places and activities mentioned. You can also find them at: <https://sites.google.com/site/goingforbroketravelog/reference-links>

I've greatly enjoyed editing this book and have benefited by repeated readings. I hope you will enjoy and learn from the book as well.

Steve Scena

Introduction

How Going for Broke Was Born

The travel notes you are about to read drop you into my life right after I quit my job and am about to begin the journey that led to ordaining as a Buddhist monk. It would help you follow the story to know some of what came before. Above all, why I was considering becoming a monk.

It was not until my first year in college in 1989 that I learned about Buddhism, in a course on World Religions. I immediately took to it. I felt that, in a sense, I was already leading a Buddhist life. I went on to learn to meditate, read Buddhist books, attend retreats and visit monasteries. I loved meditating. I remember crying on the last day of my first silent retreat because everyone was talking and I wanted to continue with my intense meditation. I wanted to keep living a meditative life. I became a confirmed Theravada Buddhist layperson after that.

If you read the original Buddhist Theravada texts in English, you might have a thought that it might be nice to become a monk. That was how I felt. It was just a passing thought at first, but the more I practiced and studied, the more I wanted to do it as a profession rather than a

hobby. There was one problem. I just couldn't get myself to do it.

I had become a professional programmer making an incredible amount of money. I was living a comfortable life in a wealthy town, but was not attached to the comfort. I owned very little, not even a TV. I did not get caught up in stream of the world. I was living a simple life by choice and was happy with that. That was my way. My career and its pay became a nice security blanket. Even though I did not suck on a corner as some kids do, you could not pull it away from me. Leaving this "life" behind would be a huge risk. I could not do it or maybe the pull to be a monk was not strong enough.

During my first contract at Pitney Bowes, a fellow consultant did quite a lot of backpacking and had many scanned pictures on his desktop. I was inspired and bought a backpack, thinking that when that gig ended I would go traveling. I never went on that trip. I loved my work. I never felt I needed a break from it.

It was not until 1999 when an ethical problem arose at work (described in "Monastery Note 5") that I decided it was time to follow my dream of traveling and seeing whether I really could ordain as a monk. I left my job, sold

my car, gave up my apartment, and moved back to my parents' house for a few months before setting out.

I sold the car for about \$18,000 and allocated that money as my travel budget. My plan was to travel for two years, but the trip was cut short when I decided to take the plunge and become a monk.

As I traveled, instead of writing ten or so postcards a month, I decided to send detailed notes to my friends and family all at once using an email service called Egroups.com (now owned by Yahoo). That way I could write a more detailed letter in the same time it would take to write ten or so separate ones. I could also share my adventures with more people. In order to do that I traded my Windsurfer for a friend's mini-laptop, which of course fit nicer into my backpack.

Initially there were about 50 people on my list. As I traveled I told my new friends about my updates, and the list grew to nearly 200 people. As it grew I started to spend a more time on each note.

I wrote updates approximately every six weeks. Once I started living at monasteries the notes became less frequent. Near the end I was writing less than one update per year since I was busy with monastic life. A friend

oversaw the list, and every once in a while I sent him an update on disk via a monastery resident going back home. I'm not sure about the original dates for each message, but am including approximate dates to give you an idea of the timeline.

The man who wrote these early notes was very different from the one you will find toward the end. At the beginning, the trip was more of a backpacking adventure. I was making up for the travel I longed to do but didn't due to my work. If you are bored, skip that chapter and start the next. If that does not grab you, then go to the next and do the same until you get to the last chapter. Read that and then say you are finished with the book. However, please do not quit during the travel section and before I ordain. That is the part I like the most.

I have not written an update since early 2006, and do not plan to write much more in the same style. I have gathered all the travel notes, plus one I wrote back in 1993, and put them together in one document I have named *Going for Broke*, which you are now about to read.

May this bring you happiness, and inspire you.

Bhikkhu S.

Note: I wrote the first travel note after an interesting experience at Chicago's O'Hare airport, six years before *Going for Broke* was born. I am including this story of the "secret tunnel" because I think it gives a good sense of my spirit of adventure when I travel and of my sense of humor. You might want to read it first as a preview of what it will be like seeing things through my eyes when you read the book. You can find it in the [Appendix](#).

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Part I: Travel Section

Travel Note 1: California

November 15, 1999

Greetings from California!

As promised and very late, here is a note to all of you describing my trek so far. The letters have not been too frequent (this is the first one) because I have been in the United States for the past six or so weeks. This part of the trip is not really a trek in my mind. Rather, it is a trip to visit the three most prominent Western Theravada monasteries. As some of you know, my aspiration is to ordain as a bhikkhu, or what most people refer to as a Buddhist monk. You may have already noticed my e-mail handle of JGMonk. Just as one would visit a college before signing up for a four-year commitment, so too should a “would-be monk” take time to visit monasteries, where there is a minimum seven-year commitment (one year lay, one year novice, and five as a Bhikkhu). So which places did I spend time at?

For the first two weeks of October 1999, I stayed at the Bhāvanā Society in West Virginia (www.bhavana-society.org). I arranged to get there via bus. Since I had never taken a long trip on a Greyhound bus before, this WAS an EXPERIENCE. Very few people are aware that

there is a whole bus subculture! It is similar to the Twilight Zone, and if you are on an overnight trip, it becomes even stranger (you should be hearing the Twilight Zone theme in the background right now). I first heard about this on NPR, but you've got to ride to believe it!

Bhāvanā was no doubt a beautiful place to spend two weeks (all the monasteries I visited were beautiful). “*Bhāvanā*” means “mental development” or “meditation.” I had only scheduled to stay until October 8, but decided to stay for a retreat and work with a visiting monk named Bhante Vimalaraśi. I was glad I stayed for the retreat, because the previous week was not that much fun. It was all work and very little meditation, except on the retreat. That was my main gripe about the place. Since the main reason to ordain is to meditate, this makes it my third choice out of three. After leaving the Bhāvanā Society, I went to Washington, D.C. to check out the Lincoln Memorial. It was moving to see the Gettysburg Address as an adult. Without much further delay, I went to catch my flight to San Francisco.

San Francisco is a cool city, and it ain't so warm, either! I have no clue why I never ended up there earlier. I guess I was a little mama's boy and wanted to stay near home

after all! I had half a night and half a day to check out the city. Luckily, the hostel I chose was right in the middle of Union Square, and from there one does not need to spend a lot of time to get to the heart of the city. The next morning I walked to Chinatown, got some food, and then caught a bus to Ukiah to see the Abhayagiri Monastery. The travel by Greyhound and city bus took the whole day. After getting off the bus, there was a four- to five-mile hike to the monastery. Luckily, I was able to hitch a ride from some people in a pickup truck who said they were going to the same place. It was odd that people who were driving like maniacs with a person in the back (with no tailgate) would be going to a peaceful Buddhist monastery. Well, it turned out they were going to a different monastery and mistook their monastery for the only one in town (just as I had). As it happens, Mendocino County is filled with religious communities. This is the same place where Jim Jones made his big debut. I was going to stop by his place for a drink, but I didn't have enough time to spare!!! I was really lucky to get a ride since my pack was a little heavier than I planned it to be. As time goes on, I will get rid of more and more stuff. Once I get rid of my tent, it will be at just the right weight (40 lbs.).

I ended up spending 10 days at Abhayagiri. The name means “fearless mountain.” This was the most beautiful of the three monasteries I visited. How beautiful was it? Well, the land is so big and remote that it was used to grow marijuana by the previous occupants, who needed to leave in a hurry! The monastery rests on 250 acres of mountainous land. To give you a gauge on how remote it is, my campsite took nearly 20 minutes to get to from the main hall, and I was only one-third the way out! Most sites had breathtaking views of cliffs and valleys. It was something to write home about (as I’m doing now). The monastery is part of the lineage of Ajhan Chah, and readings by and about him and what he taught can be found at <http://www.accesstoinight.org>. The monastery website is at <http://www.abhayagiri.org>. They have pictures of the place there too. After visiting, I was in love with it and wanted to sign up right away. Luckily for my mother, due to zoning laws they were no longer accepting applicants. However, they say this will be fixed in a year or so.

So back to San Fran I went. I had a few days to spend there since I caught a nearly door-to-door ride a little sooner than expected. I was able to spend some time during the Halloween celebration. Halloween is taken very

seriously in San Francisco, and the residents ascribe to it a pride similar to what New Yorkers have for New Year's. So where does one go to check out the costumes? The Castro District, of course! The costumes were also something to write home about (as I'm doing now). This was an experience not to miss, and I recommend anyone planning to travel to San Francisco to do so during Halloween. If you go then make sure you make reservations early! Well, that is enough to say about San Fran without boring you, except to say that Haight Street was still alive and pretty wild.

My last stop was Mettā Forest Monastery. Mettā means "loving- kindness." On paper, this monastery looked like the most difficult to get to, but my luck was still going strong. After taking a Greyhound bus to the city bus, I was dropped off on a street corner, facing an eight-mile hike carrying a very heavy pack. Did I mention that people in Southern California are SOOO nice? Well, they are. The people on the bus were very concerned about me walking up in the mountains alone. One person even told me he would pick me up in two hours if I was still at the store asking for rides (as they recommended since there is virtually no one on the streets and they are very dark). This is orchard country and very few people travel these roads.

Luckily, I asked a mother with a child if she was going my way, and she volunteered to drive me the entire way. It was too good to be true, but it really was true!

Mettā is situated in an avocado grove in the middle of nowhere, and there is plenty of shade in its artificial forest. This place is so remote that the main phone is a high-powered cell phone, and the whole place runs on solar power! The abbot, ħānissaro Bhikkhu, is a meditation master and scholar. I consider him one of the best teachers in the West, and possibly the world. He has written and translated many books and suttas (available on the Access to Insight website mentioned earlier) and a widely accepted “rule book” of Buddhist monasticism as well. Hey, if you’re going to mingle with Buddhists, you might as well mingle with the guy who writes the rules!

There are 227 rules for a monk to follow, and Ajahn ħānissaro’s book explaining them is not so slender! Eventually, I will have to memorize all these rules in PāḤ (a classical Indian language related to Sanskrit) if I want to be a monk. Most Thai monks do this during their five-year commitment. The rules take up approximately 45 pages of text, and PāḤ is not an easy language to work with. It usually takes around an hour and 40 minutes to recite the

rules in a normal manner, and 50 minutes if you do it like the guy who reads the fine print for car leases on TV. Most monks do it in 50 minutes at this monastery.

Whether to ordain at Mettā or Abhayagiri is a really tough decision to make. I still haven't made up my mind. However, I now know that there are places in the West where it's possible to ordain. I will be traveling to more monasteries in the future, including Wat Pa Nanachat in Thailand. Well, my battery is running out on this very cool, small, yet heavy laptop. I'm now off to Hawaii for two months.

See you soon.

Jeremy

Travel Note 2: Hawaii I

December 17, 1999

Aloha!

I'm sending you my second note all the way from Kauai, Hawaii! This island is absolutely gorgeous! There is nothing to do here except hang out and enjoy the island's natural beauty. But wait a moment! We've got to explain how I got here.

Reroottt!

(That is the sound of a phonograph needle being dragged back over the record.)

So I ended up going to the Banana Bungalow in Hollywood, California after my visit to the Mettā Forest Monastery. If you ever need a hostel in the L.A. area, SKIP THIS ONE. But looking on the bright side, they had a really good tour of L.A. We went to everything worth seeing, and it only took one day. In Beverly Hills, we beeped the Banana Van at all the joggers we saw. If the jogger looked up, then he or she was NOT an important person. The Banana Tour was also the only tour company that went into "THE HOOD" of South Central L.A. Overall, it was an

interesting tour and quite a contrast to the monastic lifestyle.

So off I was for Hawaii. I ended up staying in Waikiki at the Banana Bungalow again. Yes, the Banana is a chain! Some people have asked what the hostels are like. They are just like living in a college dorm except that there are 6 to 8 people to a room. College dorms differ from campus to campus, so you never really know what to expect. Hostels can be a really cheap way to travel, costing around \$15-\$20 per night in the United States. Many non-“Hostel International” (AYHI) hostels check for either a foreign passport or an ongoing international airline ticket. This prevents locals from checking in for \$20 and coming out with \$500 worth of gear... oops, sidetrack....

So I'm at the Hollywood Banana Bungalow and there is a girl who has the same flight to Hawaii as me. Since she was traveling alone and female, she quickly latched on to me like fresh Velcro. This phenomenon is hardly due to my magnetic sex appeal (if any is left). I would guess that women do not like traveling alone. However, it is very common for men to go it alone. Many times, lone travelers buddy up with each other on the fly as they travel to save expenses. There was nothing sexual between us, and

needless to say, hooking up with a beer-drinking, partying Kiwi (New Zealander) was not my favorite part of the trip. I did, however, stay with her long enough to burn a hole in my pocket and end up in Kauai. It turned out that she was spending British pounds against my paltry U.S. dollars. To top it off, she was on the last leg of her trip. This caused me to spend lots of money just to keep up with her activity list. Well, live and learn!

With her British pound budget (and my U.S. dollars) we decided to do a three day “fly and drive” trip to Kauai from Honolulu. It’s an island I’d never heard of, yet after three days, I found it difficult to leave, so I stayed while SHE went home with her unlimited budget. With my two-month Hawaiian budget nearly gone in one week, and six weeks left to kill, I went into a computer shop and asked what the job outlook was like. I said I would do some high-tech work for only \$10 per hour if needed. A woman overheard my conversation with the shop owner and offered me a room in exchange for one hour a day (on average) of consulting. Sounded like a good deal to me. Justin, my headhunter, is probably scratching his head after reading this, saying, “Is that all I needed to offer him?” It doesn’t matter how much money you made on

the “mainland,” because there is nothing but a tourist and farm economy here. That is all!

Well, if you ever come to Hawaii, go to Kauai. This is THE MOST beautiful island of Hawaii, so I’m told. However, I hardly imagine anyone saying that they CHOSE to live on the worst island in Hawaii. I’m sure you’ll find some people from East L.A. who think they live in the best city of California too! In any case, Kauai is surely a beautiful island.

An interesting thing about the island is the beach camping culture. There are people who have been living in tents on the beaches for 1 to 12 months or even longer. I’ve always told my friends that if one is going to be homeless person... or a monk... Hawaii would sure beat the pants off of New York. It looks like I’m not the only one who figured this out. Hippies, hippies, and more hippies are all around us, but I have yet to be panhandled. Homeless people are a different breed here. In addition, many travelers opt for this way of life. Why pay \$15 per night for a crowded dorm room when you can pay \$3 per night to live in a tent ON THE BEACH. With the money saved, one can buy food or even rent a car from the local rent-a-wreck dealer.

Hitching on Kauai is very easy, and it is one of my preferred ways to travel.

Traveling Light

I put the finishing touches to this note at the famous Polihale State Park. This is about the only exciting thing about dragging this mini notebook that weighs 3 to 5 lbs. with all its attachments. I'm debating whether or not to send it home. Speaking of which, as one backpacks around the world, one finds that one needs less and less. You really start to know what is worth keeping every time you pick up the pack. I used to have a rule at home: If there was a box I haven't looked in for five years, I should throw it out without even looking inside. The same is true with the pack, except the rule spans two weeks. I haven't worn my turtleneck in 3 weeks – time to give it away! I haven't cracked open my PāʻŌ book in two months – time to send it to a Buddhist library. I've used this laptop primarily for these travel notes and hardly anything else. You'll soon know whether I give it up or not. If I give it up, these travel notes will be as follows:

“Hi, I'm in such and such place... gotta go... bye!!”

I'll be here for a few more weeks and then I'm off to Fiji. I'll see you around, or as they say in Hawaii, Aloha!!

Jeremy

P.S. One last thing. If you ever come to Hawaii and plan to stay on Kauai, try to stay for a while. It takes some time, but after a month or so you really start to see what the island is all about. Camp on the beaches, find a work exchange, hitch around the island, and you will soon see why everyone wants to live here. It's not the locals or even the beauty of the island. It's... well... how should I describe it? Maybe it's best left for those who wish to experience it.

P.P.S. I'd like to thank Katherine for taking me in, and Susan for buying my car. Without them (and others too) this experience would be different.

Travel Note 3: Hawaii II

January 31, 2000

Aloha!!!

Kauai is an island that has a lot of history, personality, and ENERGY. Theoretically, as I have been told and now believe, Kauai either embraces you with both arms or chews you up and spits you out. I have been living in Kauai for over 8 weeks now, and it looks as though the island is holding on to me very tightly. Most of you do not know that my last name means “luck” in Yiddish, and that will be the theme of this travel note to you.

First, let me tell you MY Christmas story. There are only two things that Jewish people do on Christmas: Go see a movie and eat Chinese food. To keep up the tradition, I started to hitchhike to the nearest movie theater, which was about 25 miles away. Hitchhiking on Christmas was surprisingly harder than normal. There were about one-third the amount of cars on the road, and most were late for their Christmas dinner and packed with family members. I was standing on the side of the road against all odds, but still kept a smile on my face... After about half an hour, a couple pulled over and gave me a ride. Since our destination was a good forty minutes away, we started

talking. He was a music teacher, and I told him my deal with computers. Since I had a teaching degree, and I planned on relocating in Kauai after my trip ends (if it does), I asked him what the job outlook was for teachers. He immediately responded by telling me that the computer teacher at his school had resigned with less than a week's notice, and that the board was really worried about how they would finish the rest of the term after the students come back from Xmas vacation.

Funny we should meet, don't you think?

It fits me perfectly!

Let us review:

1. I have a teaching degree in technology and some teaching experience.
2. I was a professional programmer.
3. They are desperate for someone to teach computers, which means they might hire someone like me!!

Sounds odd that this would fall into my lap while sitting down for a ride I just hitched! "But wait, there's more!"

So he drops me off near the movie theater (about a 10-minute walk away) and drives off with my telephone

number. I saw “The Talented Mr. Ripley” (hated it), ate some Thai food (almost Chinese), and then proceeded to hitchhike back home... Guess who picked me up again? At this point, the three of us decided this was more than chance and too hard to ignore. In less than three days, I was hired by Kula High and Intermediate School (This school is now closed; its archived web pages are found at: <https://goo.gl/lm0Nml>). It has only eighty students (grades 7-12) and was built by a man who wanted his two daughters to attend a good school. Pretty nice father, eh? It’s also funny that the most prestigious private school on the island literally hired the first person they picked up off the street!!! All that said, I was overqualified for the job. It is sort of funny or strange that the school has an underlying current of spirituality. The (white) father has been to India, has his own guru living on his estate compound, and his two daughters are named Sita and Leela, which are Sanskrit names. An interesting school, yes, but I’ve been working many hours for the past two weeks, and that will change starting today, since surfing has to be a part of my Hawaiian life. Now wait a minute... weren’t you going to ordain as a monk? Yup... but I must ride before I robe!!!

So... I met this security guard at Secret Beach, which is one of my favorite places. His job is to tell everyone to put their

clothes back on since most travel books list it as an “unofficial nude beach.” Somehow we started talking about surfing, and he tells me that I can use his board as long as I want if I fix a broken fin and some dings, which will cost around \$50. Considering daily rentals cost \$15-\$20, this seemed like a good deal.

So I was trying to locate Clyde, who is known on the island as the surfboard repairman. “Your ding is his thing.” It was early in the morning, and I didn’t know if I should wake him up, so I asked the first guy I saw with a surfboard on his car if it would be OK. He told me I should wake him up, and that money, not sleep, was his “thing.” He also told me he had a mint Dick Brewer board for \$100. Dick Brewer boards are highly regarded in Hawaii. Hummm.... It didn’t take long to decide to jump on it. So now I’m the owner of a surfboard, but no car.... This is where Katherine helps me out with an island car, or shall we say truck.

What is an “island car?” An island car is a car that usually sells for less than \$1000 and usually is composed of a decent engine, rust, and bondo (putty). Most island cars have trouble passing the “safety” test that is far more lenient than mainland safety tests. A good majority of the doors either do not open or do not shut. Their owners are

either found climbing out of their cars or strapping them shut. The truck I'm driving has a backpack strap that holds the driver's side door closed. When I pick up hitchhikers, and they decide the car is safe enough for them to hitch in, I have to get out after they get in and close their door a special way! I once had a hitcher refuse a ride after I did this! Driving an island car is a fun thing to do, and I recommend using the local "rent-a-wreck" person named Elmo or Dom when you come to the island. It is all part of the experience. There are many advantages to driving these cars.

1. If it rains and you forgot to close the windows, it doesn't matter since the water leaks in anyway!
2. Since most of these cars need specific instructions on how to drive (tweak) them, you can leave the keys in the ignition without any worries.
3. Even if you can lock the doors, there is no need, even if you have a Dick Brewer board in the back. No worries. Island cars are respected among the locals, and there are too many shiny rental cars to go through first.
4. "Climb on in" takes on a whole new meaning.

5. You still get to hitchhike since most of these cars are either “day cars,” “no rain cars,” or “short distance (North Shore) cars.”

6. If you drop food in the car, no worries. The bugs and animals that live in it will take care of it for you.

So I was learning how to surf (still haven’t figured it out yet) one day when the waves were really big. As I was approaching the beach, I saw one of my friends walking out with a damaged board. He told me to be careful, but to surfers (even if one is still learning) that means it’s the day you’ve been waiting for. Swell!

I need to tell you about the leash. That is a device that connects you to the board. When you fall off and the waves are finished pounding you, you pull on this strap and the board will come back to you like magic. Losing a leash is rare, but when it happens it can be a scary thing. Can you say, NO FLOTATION DEVICE? Yup... I panicked when it happened to me that day.

I fell off my board and got stuck right where the waves were breaking. Just before a wave would crash on my head, I dove into the water to soften the impact. The currents would then spin me under the water for some time until I was allowed to pop up to the surface for a

quick gulp of air. At that point, before I could think, another wave was already staring me down. I would then dive down repeatedly as before. I got scared and actually screamed “Help!” but nobody could hear or see me in the waves. That was when I panicked and thought I would surely die. Finally, there was a break in the sets of waves rolling over me and I had a moment of clarity. I asked myself where my runaway surfboard was and saw that it was safely ashore while I was stuck in a washing machine! At that moment I knew what to do. I kicked my legs up and floated on my back, acting like a surfboard, and made it safely back to shore. It was almost like in the movies where the shipwrecked person staggers onto shore and then collapses on the DRY sand. That was what happened to me. After I made it back... I did some serious contemplating about the meaning of life – at least for the rest of the day!

For New Year's I hiked the Kalalau Trail. This is an eleven-mile hike rated by the Sierra Club as an 8 out of 10 for difficulty. Since Everest is rated 10, I didn't think an 8 would be a big deal until...ahem... I hiked it! Imagine a trail that goes up and down the cliff-lined Nā Pali Hawaiian coastline. Now imagine the trail only having enough room for one hiker at a time with a two- to three-hundred-foot

drop on one side, a rock wall on the other, and endless amounts of MUD to make it more interesting. When people see you on the trail, they say “have a safe hike” rather than “have a good hike.” I experienced my first fall during mile 3 or 4 when I fell off the trail/cliff and found myself holding on to two trees for my life with a 40-pound pack on my back. Did I mention my legs were dangling off the edge? I was very lucky to have two trees conveniently placed for both arms. After that happened, I decided to take the trail a little more seriously – and slower too!

I was hiking the trail with these shoes called Tobbies. Tobbies look like green army socks that have those green plastic dishwashing scrubby things that 3M makes as the sole. Two types of people use these Tobbies: fishermen and people who hike this trail. They are so common for hiking the trail that they sell them at the Big Save supermarket down the road. Supposedly, they keep you from slipping in the mud. They work to some extent, but mud is mud, and sliding and slipping was still very common. The advantage to wearing Tobbies is that you don’t have to worry about blisters since they are socks and not boots. So your feet get wet... puddles don’t scare you, do they? Who cares about leptospirosis. Did I say LEPTOSPIROSIS???

Leptospirosis sounds pretty scary, doesn't it? Did you know that if you have leprosy, you cannot become a monk? Thankfully the two diseases are not related. There are a few hundred cases reported every year in Hawaii. Supposedly, no one gets leptospirosis while on the Kalalau Trail because it is blessed land.

There is a lot of mythology, magic, and legends that go along with the land of Kalalau Valley. Only pure people can make it to the valley. According to legend, a whole exorcism takes place while you hike the eleven treacherous miles. Legend has it that if the exorcism is not complete, you flip out and want to leave immediately. That would explain why the first day I was there someone who went with a tour group was flipping out and drew SOS in the sand for a helicopter to pick her up.

Helicopters are the ONLY means of escape from Kalalau during the winter months. Even the park ranger uses a copter. Tourist helicopters frequent the area since it is the key sight to see. However, why fly BY a waterfall when you can drink and shower IN one?

I made it into Kalalau early in the morning on New Year's Eve. My welcome committee was more than sufficient. I remember it really clearly, and it was bigger than

awesome! I was walking around checking out the Kalalau scene with my pack still on and dripping sweat when I saw a bunch of people cooking by a cave. They saw me and hand-signaled me to come to their cave.

They said, “Did you just come in?” When I answered yes, they said, “Welcome home, Brother! Give the man some pancakes!” You have no clue how good the HOT pancakes tasted. You’re talking to someone who had been eating cold raw oatmeal on the trail! It was by far the best welcome I ever had anywhere. But it kept getting better! The New Year's celebration had not even begun yet! I had a hard time deciding whether I wanted to be a hermit or social for the New Year. At the last minute (not to be mistaken for 11:59 p.m.) I decided to go with the social Y2K.

I donated a package of black beans for the community meal and helped peel the freshly roasted hand-picked Kalalau coffee beans. Always bring extra food, and if you can... BRING CHOCOLATE!!! Chocolate can make many people happy in rainbow land. The meal had begun and the preparation started early in the morning.

Have you ever had coffee from beans picked earlier that day? This was the most amazing thing I have ever tasted. It

is a shame that I'm not a coffee connoisseur, but I'm sure that it really was good.

It was still light out and the party was just getting started. You would be amazed at what people hiked into the valley. There were several drums, guitars, and a few flutes. Not only did people bring in music, but there was actually a community guitar also. OK... slightly damaged, but it held a tuning and was good enough for me to give it a try in between grinding the coffee with a rock... Hey, that's a pun.... We rocked with grinding guitars!!!

So darkness settled in with a postcard sunset.... (Let me tell you that this island is like a 3-D virtual reality of surreal paintings... but it's realer than life!!!) The food was on the fire, the music was jamming out, and the STARS were shining. The only light for 11 miles was from people's flashlights or from the fire. Every star was surely visible, and shooting stars were very common that night. At around 11:30 I went and grabbed my chocolate and passed it around the fire. Many treats were going around the fire, including the Kalalau bean stew. UMMMMMM good. It was so good, it was something to write home about (like I'm doing now). Then came the coffee.... And later on we counted down to the New Year. Words cannot give justice

to the beautiful moment that lasted nearly six or so hours.
It was not wild or noisy, but just beautifully held together
by the community spirit and love.

I wrote a song about that night I call “The Kalalau Song.”

Everyone was gathered around in the Y2K night.
Faces were shining wide and... oh... lovely and
bright
The world might die but nobody would care,
Because happy love, sharing ‘n’ caring was in the
air
So we are singing Kalalau Kalalau Kalalau!
(repeat)

Everybody was gathered around the fire light,
Happy and shining... Oh, what a night!
Everybody was waiting for that delicious Kalalau
Stew,
Singing songs, playing guitar and drums to every
song we knew.
So we are singing Kalalau Kalalau Kalalau!
(repeat)

Everybody was gathered around the fire light,
Happy and shining... Oh, what a night!
Everybody was still waiting for that delicious

Kalalau Stew,
Singing songs, playing guitar and drums to every
song we knew.
So we are singing Kalalau Kalalau Kalalau!
(repeat)

So glad you came
To the gathering.
We are so glad you came
To the gathering.

There were around 100 people who made it over to the valley during New Year's and it was way over capacity. I didn't get to stay there long since I had to report to the school the following Monday. I hung out in the valley for most of the next day and then took off so I could make it to the eight-mile campsite before dark. When I was hiking back, at one point I lost the trail. It was an interesting moment. The trail is usually so hairy it is hard to tell when you are on the trail or not. But this time it was really bad. Someone saw me walking on a false path and said, "Brother, I think you are off the trail." I called out, asking him if he could keep talking so I could follow his voice, but before I could finish my sentence... agggghhhhh!!!... I fell off

a small ledge. This time there were no trees placed so conveniently as last time. I did manage, however, to pull out some weeds on the trail as I reached out for something to hold onto, which may have broken my fall. I slid around four or five feet and then fell down another five feet into a small brook. I was a little shaken. Luckily I only had a little scrape on my knee. I did manage to lose my glasses and they were never recovered. Fortunately, I had a spare pair in my pack.

So... I'm finishing this note to you before February comes around the bend. I'm still at the teaching job, and I was supposed to go to Fiji 10 days ago. You've gotta love these flexible tickets!! Aloha, my friends... take care... and stay tuned for more adventures!!!

With Mettā (loving-kindness),

Jeremy

Travel Note 4: Hawaii III

March 7, 2000

A A L L O O H H A A!!!

Recently I was in the pool area of a friend's condo here that requires a key to get in AND get out. He needed to go to work and left his key after he let us inside. There are usually plenty of people who could let you out but everyone had left. I was in the hot tub when I realized I was trapped. Trapped in a hot tub! I realized that this was the story of my life on a micro level. On another level, here I am stuck on this exquisite island of paradise! Poor me!

It has been almost a month since I even thought of writing my friends on the mainland (and some new ones beyond). Several things have changed, and I'm not too sure where to start. I have established myself on the island. I have a cell phone, a bicycle, and a job teaching computers to teenagers. Although I have committed myself to teaching, I did not agree to teach until the end of the year. I will be leaving in April, so I think. I'm pretty sure of that. I made my decision when I realized that every day was no longer Sunday and I was starting to live for the weekends. I concluded that living for the weekends was a terrible way to live. I did not quit my job in New York so that I could

work somewhere else. I will be leaving sometime in April. It will be interesting to leave. It is also scary to leave a place that you are in love with and where everything is working out as well. It reminds me of the last girlfriend I had. I was still in love with her, but I felt the hold, and the sound of the ball and chain clinking and clanking off in the far distance was getting louder. I felt tied down and did not feel like I could do a trip like this WITH her. I needed to see this world, to scratch this travel itch....

So the trek must continue... and I must move on!

I've been here for over three months. If you remember, I was only supposed to stay for three days. Now that I've REALLY seen the island, let me tell you some things about it. First, it has been a great pleasure to play and sing with PINKMAN. So who is this Pinkman?

He is quite well known on the West Coast. From time to time he dresses up in a pink suit and rides a unicycle through crowds of people. It is quite funny to see. It makes people smile, and that is why he does it. He is the super hero who fights depression and solemn looks. He is also a singer and songwriter. The music he does sounds nice, but it might be just in the context of the island. I'm starting to realize that the island makes everything quite attractive. (You can check him out at

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pink_Man and
<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=YE-esLHmoYY>.)

A person who gave me a ride once said, “Tourists always fall in love with me in such a short time. They think I’m Mr. Right, but it’s the island, not me.” This, my friends, is a very wise man.

Anyway, Pinkman lives at Anini Beach Park. Regardless of the island’s charm, Anini is the origin of some of the most beautiful people on the island. I have experienced some really lovely nights there. Even though I have a place to stay, I still camp out there on the weekends. It’s one of my favorite things to do with my free time. The same can be said about Secret Beach.

If you remember, in the last note I wrote that I lost my glasses on the Kalalau trail. You will be happy to hear that I no longer need to use any lenses at all. Yup... I did it. I got the LASIK eye surgery 3 weeks ago. I’m not going to talk about the surgery other than to say that it was quick, expensive, and successful.

I recently moved to a different place. I have to pay rent for this new place and it does not come with an “island car.” If you remember, I was driving a pickup truck that people

were afraid to ride in. So here I am with a job and no car. Getting to work means I need to leave an hour before working time and start to thumb my way 5 miles down the road. This is hardly a difficult task on the North Shore of Kauai.

Let me explain the difference between owning a car and hitching, and how it affects the typical day. When I had the use of a car, I went to work in the morning, finished work in the evening, and then picked up some groceries on the way home. Then I would cook dinner, eat, and go to bed only to wait for the next morning to do the same thing. Does this sound familiar? Today, when I was hitching, the person who gave a ride to me and another hitcher (there are hitching sweet spots which sometimes have several people at them) told us that he had to check on his horses on the way to Kapa'a (pronounced Ka-pah-ah). Since I didn't need to be at work for another 45 minutes, I thought, "What the hay!" and went along for the ride. We stopped off at a pasture and saw two of his six horses. He gave them some breakfast and then we continued on to school.

Was that better than a fresh cup of coffee or what? So I finished my day at school and went hitchhiking right

outside the school. I'm not too sure the owner of the school or the parents feel comfortable with a teacher who hitches around the island. In any case, I quickly got a ride from two people from the local youth hostel. We all decided to go to another favorite place, called the Blue Room, which is a good half hour beyond my house.

The Blue Room is a wet cave that you can swim in (some go skinny dipping). Most people walk up to the cave, shoot a picture, and then leave. But that is not the Blue Room. You must swim into the cave to get the full effect. You have to swim in far enough so that there is no light in sight and it becomes totally dark. Afterwards, your eyes quickly adjust, even if you had surgery on them recently. Here, the only light that can be seen is from the internal reflection of the minerals in the crystal clear water. This effect reminds most people of the nostalgic lava lamp. Let us recap. Imagine swimming in a lava lamp! Now you can see why this is one of my favorite places. This Blue Room is a sacred place and a place for healing and meditation. Legend has it that you needed permission from the Queen to bathe in the Blue Room. Permission was only granted if you were a special person (meaning the Queen's lover or someone with lots of money) or in need of the healing waters. Of course times have changed, and anyone

including myself can get in. As Woody Allen once said, quoting Groucho Mark, “I would never want to belong to a club which would accept me as a member!” Even so, this place is something to write home about (as I’m doing now).

Oh... where was I? Oh, yes... So we went to the Blue Room and then we all went back. It was quite a nice detour, wasn’t it? This type of thing does not happen when you have your own car. We say it will, but it doesn’t. A funny thing called routine settles upon us when we have something called “a sure thing” or a car that works. That is why one should get an island car instead of a shiny rental car if one insists on getting a car at all! Some of my friends and I talk about the vicious cycle that starts with a car. Here is how it goes.

1. First you find some excuse to get a car.
2. Then you need a job to put money into the car so it can go.
3. Then you need a place to chill out, shower, etc. after you come home from work.

4. Then you need to work more so you can have a nicer place to chill out from a hard day's work.
5. Then you need to work more so you can afford a vacation from work.
6. You finally get enough money together to take two years off from work and you go to Hawaii for a few months and then you get a car!!!! Please refer to item one for the next step.

As I've said, there are benefits of having an island car versus a shiny rental car. There are also advantages to having NO CAR AT ALL, i.e., hitching.

1. Gulf war crises do not interest you at all.
2. When the school you work for is having a car wash as a fundraiser, there is absolutely no guilt trip, although I still fall victim to Girl Scout cookies!
3. You get to meet a lot of people.
4. Getting to work is not just a job, it's an adventure!
5. Spontaneity works better while hitching.
6. Although it is rare (very rare), some women actually pick up male hitchers for the same obvious reasons that men pick up female hitchers.

7. Kind and generous people with time on their hands pick up hitchhikers and you get to ride with them!

8. Jobs can come your way while hitchhiking (that's how I got mine).

9. "Where did I put my keys?" is not in a hitchhiker's vocabulary.

10. You don't need to have a job to pay for a car.

One of the things I've noticed about Hawaii is that even though it is still America, it is a culture very different from the mainland. This culture is seen more on Kauai than on Maui or Oahu. Sometimes I find myself laughing at the fact that I'm still in America. You see, I get the best of both worlds – the different culture, almost the same language, and the political stability of the U.S. government. As much as I think the politics is a bunch of kaka, it gives us the nice illusion that the government is stable.

So let me tell you some things about the culture. Everyone says aloha! There are no hellos or goodbyes in Hawaii. It is the simple "aloha." It is similar to "shalom" in Hebrew, but I've never used that word so I cannot really compare it to that. I can, however, tell you what aloha means in addition to hello and goodbye from my own experience. It means

relax, don't worry, do it island style, peace, love, beauty, and happiness. All this is conveyed as a greeting of hello or goodbye. I've gotten very used to the word aloha. I can say so much with one word.

When I say aloha as "hello," I'm really saying, "Hello, my friend, I'm very relaxed, in love with this island, and you must be too. You are a pleasure to come in contact with, and our visit together will be a union of two (or more) souls on this blessed island." When I say aloha as "goodbye," I am really conveying more of a wish of happiness to the person I recently connected with. Below are some of things aloha means as "goodbye":

Aloha...

May you be well.

May you relax and enjoy peace on our parting.

May you shine so that I may see you from a distance.

May you appreciate and share in the beauty that I see.

Love, may you know love

And feel the internal and external vibrations.

May a part of this Hawaiian spirit touch your soul,
soothe your eyes, and quiet your mind.

Smile, and release the worries around you.

Let go.

Goodbye.

It will be a shame to give it up. I will try to keep this word in my vocabulary, but I'm sure I'll start to pick up other words from other countries as well.

With that note, I think it would be appropriate to say...

AALLOOOOHHAA!!!

Jeremy

Travel Note 5: Hawaii IV

April 23, 2000

Again it has been quite a while since my last update to you. Many things have changed in my life. The last time I wrote, I mentioned that I was paying rent, had a job, and was quite established on the island. Now I no longer have a job or a place to stay (with hot showers) and I'm also a convicted criminal who is itching to leave the country!

So here is the story. I gave the school my 6 weeks' notice, meaning that I would not be around to teach for the fourth quarter. Somehow, I managed to get a friend of mine into the school to take my place. Conveniently enough, the room I was renting was no longer available two days after quitting because the owner was coming back from Germany. Can you say, "Freedom!" Rather than visit Anini Beach on the weekends, I was able to live there full-time. Yes!!! Every day is back to Sunday. Let me tell you that Kauai is a much nicer island when "work" is not part of your daily vocabulary!

After a few days, I decided to go back to Kalalau. I was a little apprehensive about going back since I almost killed myself *twice* the last time I hiked the trail. In addition, I had a nice taste in my mouth from the last time I went to

Kalalau, and I was worried things might change if I went again. In any case, I had this curiosity occupying my mind. You see, most people who go to Kalalau are totally in love with it and try to stay as long as possible. I didn't feel that way. I was curious if the second time around would win over my heart.

On my way in I met this nice "hippie chick" called Dawn. She has been traveling the islands for a while and was going into the valley for the first time to cure her curiosity as well. She was an interesting person and had enough enthusiasm to hike in with her guitar. It was quite a trip to hike a treacherous eleven-mile trail with this barefoot backpacker with a guitar strapped on her. The trail is even more dangerous when it rains, and the rain marathon had just begun when we were approaching the ninth mile.

Dawn and I were the last people to cross the rivers for the next three or four days. There were maybe four or five days of sunshine out of the thirteen days I spent in the valley. During the first break in the rain, a few people insisted on leaving. Unfortunately, it was only a four or five hour break. All of them got stuck between the two river crossings for the next three days. Since most people donate their food when they leave, they had NO FOOD.

The National Guard had to drop in food for 25 people who were stuck there for three days!

The first day in the valley was a memorable one. When I arrived, the sun peeped out for a little while. My friend Jennie came down to the beach to see the sun set, but before it did, the rain came back. Rain is not nearly as much of a drag in Hawaii as it is on the mainland. For some reason it doesn't seem cold. In any case, rain is one of the main ingredients for a rainbow (which is on every Hawaiian license plate). So now a rainbow appeared to shine right on the end of Kalalau Beach. Jennie and I decided to try to run to the end of the rainbow. Imagine this: you hike eleven miles, take a shower in a waterfall, and then go running down a long beach in a sun shower trying to catch the end of the rainbow with no clothes on. I felt so native, free, and young! Sometimes I liken Kalalau to a true Garden of Eden.

I spent quite a lot of time at the library since it was one of the few places that was only damp rather than totally saturated with water. The library ended up being a meeting place for those who didn't want to spend all their time huddled in a semi-wet tent. You might be asking yourself, "A library in the middle of the jungle, where the

only way in is by hiking eleven miles or flying in on a helicopter?” Let me tell you that this library is hardly sanctioned by the state of Hawaii. It is put together by an underground community, complete with a library, town hall, swimming pool, and even a mayor! You’ve got to love it. The library is approximately a 20-foot-by-20-foot Hawaiian-style covered terrace located under a large mango tree.

One day while I was at the library, a person who had been living in the valley for over two years who goes by the name of Uncle Tee announced that he was going to bake us all cookies. This is quite a feat to accomplish in the middle of the jungle, where ovens are non-existent. We hiked out 2 miles into the center of the valley to the Aniki kitchen. Kitchens are where fires and meals are made and people gather to eat. Food is usually cooked in a different place from where you sleep to avoid the park rangers (a.k.a. “ranger danger”). We made the cookie dough and then Uncle Tee did his magic with two cast iron frying pans, a.k.a. a Dutch oven. These were by far the best cookies I ever tasted in my life.

All the food in Kalalau is by far the best food I have ever eaten. Have you seen the movie *Like Water for Chocolate*?

This movie explains the phenomenon of how people's emotions affect how they taste food. Kalalau consists of very happy people, so the whole community normally cooks the meals with love. This is the only way I can explain why this food tastes so great. The cookies were only part of the adventure. Word spread like wildfire about the famous cookies, and almost everyone left in the valley came to the cookie party. We also made another version of Kalalau stew with green papayas and native taro leaves. Making food here is almost as much fun as eating it. I ended up playing guitar the whole night accompanied by "Kalalau Bill" on harmonica. I also ended up writing a song called "The Poison Arrow." It was one of those songs that just came to me instantly. I call it a gift from the valley. Another weird thing was that a broken hunting arrow was noticed nearby right after the song was completed.

Here is how the song goes:

The Poison Tree

Fear is a poison arrow for your brain.

When you think about it, it goes deeper inside your veins.

It will make you so scared it will drive you insane.

Because fear is a poison arrow for your brain.

Won't you free yourself?

Won't you free yourself?

Won't you free yourself?

From the poison arrow

From the poison arrow

From the poison arrow

Ranger and danger started falling from the sky.

I started running, stopped, turned around and
asked myself why.

Do I want to live in this valley with all of this fear,

Drawing that poison arrow nearer and nearer?

So won't you free yourself?

So won't you free yourself?

So won't you free yourself?

From the poison arrow

From the poison arrow

From the poison arrow

The rivers and streams are running clean, but they
say don't drink from there, my friend.

There are unclean things and unseen things that
will lead to your unpleasant end.

So I take my water bottle and fill it to the rim.
I hold it on up, give thanks, and then take it all in!

So won't you
Free yourself?
From the poison arrow.

Another song I finished in the valley creates a visual image of this beautiful and blessed island. I'm not sure whether to call it "The Kauai Song" or "The Blessed Island," but here is how it goes:

Woke up this morning
On the mountainside
And I could see the waterfalls.
Ummmmmm such a blessed Isle.

Woke up this morning
To the roosters crowing
And then the birds sang me a lullaby.
Ummmmmm such a blessed Isle.

Woke up this morning
To the rain a-pouring [a Bob Dylan-ism]
And then a rainbow starts to fill the sky.
Ummmmmm such a blessed Isle.

Woke up this morning
To the whales a-jumping
Into the air and then into a dive.
Ummmmmm such a blessed Isle
Ohhhh... such a blessed Island!
Hey... such a blessed Island!

I'd like to let you know that it really is a true song and I actually did "wake up" to "whales a-jumping" ... hmm... maybe it was during sunset while a friend was cooking dinner. It may have been either sunset or sunrise. It all merges now into a dream. However, I definitely saw it when I stayed at the eight-mile campsite while on my way to Kalalau. This impressive campsite overlooks a three-hundred-foot cliff with the ocean floor below. It was like watching a slow-motion movie. This happened because the whales were down below and off into the distance, and there were sound delays compared to what I was seeing. The result was an impressive "slow-mo" effect with my mind pasting the two sense doors together. I can still replay it in my mind and hear the waves below and the splashing of the whales as they flopped on their sides... OK... not "jumping into the air and then into a dive," but I

claim poetic freedom on that one... and it makes the whales look more respectable too! All in the name of poetry... poetically speaking... *it's like a true song.*

Get the Ticket

So I spent nearly two fun-filled weeks back in the wilderness of Kalalau. On the day I was going to hike out, I was given a ticket by the rangers who flew in by helicopter. For some odd reason, I thought that settling the ticket quickly would be easier. Unfortunately, I didn't get any breaks. Rather, I ended up getting into BIG TROUBLE. This ticket requires one to appear in court. When the judge asked me about a plea of guilty or innocent, he said that I might face a maximum of \$2000 and UP TO A YEAR IN PRISON!!!! "Whaaaa!!!" I said in amazement.... "Look, I was only camping, and now I'm going to have a criminal record?"

Have you ever heard the song "Alice's Restaurant" by Arlo Guthrie, which is usually played during Thanksgiving?

(You can hear the full song at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m57gzA2JCcM>.)

I imagined myself in prison with the mother rapers and father rapers. They would ask me what I was in for, to

which I would shamefully reply, “Camping without a permit!”

Getting the “free permit” requires writing the Parks and Recreation Office six weeks in advance, since they “sell out” quickly. This seems a political move by the state park office to prevent spontaneous campers like myself (who don’t contribute to the tourist economy) from camping in the valley. People who plan that far in advance are more or less short-term travelers. Most of these sold-out permits actually never get used since there are many factors that can prevent people from carrying through with the eleven-mile trek. For instance, I’m guessing that all the 80 permits were issued, yet only 4 out of the 15 people found in the valley during the RAID actually had permits. But if 80 people are allowed to legally live in the valley at one time, does it really matter if there are 15?

Whaoo... So it turned out that I was able to do a delayed sentencing deal since I had no prior record. To do this, I had to turn myself in and get fingerprinted. If all goes well, I will have a criminal record only for the next 6 months if I stay “clean.” After that, the record will automatically be erased. I couldn’t believe that this was actually happening to me. There is one good thing that came from the ticket.

They took my mug shot picture the day after I had just gotten back from Kalalau. Wow... you should see the smile on my face. It is very easy to pick out the people who have just returned from the valley. Their faces are glowing with this bright healing energy that gives them a very attractive perm-a-grin. We call this a state of being “Kalalau-ed.” I hardly looked like a criminal the day after I hiked out. I’m sure I’m the first person who actually asked for a copy of his mug shot to send his mother! When someone gives you lemons, the best thing you can do is make lemonade.

I look back at the event and laugh and smile. The experience of the valley and the energy is still fresh in my mind and hopefully permanently imprinted there.

Even though I smile at the event, I used this ticket as a sign to leave the island. It was really difficult to do, but again, as stated earlier, I must move on. So off I was to the Big Island to see the lava flow and then on to Fiji. In the Hawaiian spirit, I allocated three days to see the lava flowing. If I did anything else, it was extra credit.

So my plane to the Big Island got delayed and I ended up hitching during sunset. Luckily, I got picked up by a pickup, but its engine seized after a few miles. Hitching in the dark is something that should be avoided, but

sometimes when you get stuck you've got to finish the task. So I'm hitching in the dark, I'm ready to give up, and I'm literally looking for a place to pitch a tent on the side of the road (something I might get put in jail for) and I see someone's reverse lights in the distance. The driver said, "Where do you want to go today?" It was just like a Microsoft commercial! I responded, "Anywhere I can legally pitch a tent." It just so happened that this person works for the Volcano National Park Service and hooked me up with a free campground in the volcano village!

As I was pitching my tent, I warmly said "Aloha!" to the first person I saw. This person said, "Is that Jeremy?" It turned out that he was one of the four people who actually had a permit during the famous Kalalau Bust. He and his newlywed wife were traveling and camping around the islands for three weeks for their honeymoon. I somehow got myself invited to go see the lava flow with them the following night. Viewing lava is best done at night since it glows. This was something I had not counted on doing since driving was not in my vocabulary. So I'm totally unprepared for the lava trek with only my Tevas. When we got there, there was a sign strongly discouraging open-toed shoes (like Tevas). OOPS! There are two reasons why thick soles and closed toe shoes are required.

1. Sometimes the rock you walk over gets VERY HOT.

2. The terrain is similar to walking on glass.

Remember that glass is melted sand (a.k.a. lava). During this two-mile hike in the dark, I was known as the heat sensor! In other words, I would tell them if we were walking on ground that could potentially have lava underneath. Like water under an iced-over river, the lava runs underneath the solid crust. Sometimes the crust breaks, and that is what gives tourists a nice lava show. However, there is always a danger that the lava will break out WHILE YOU ARE OVER IT!!! In our case there was a breakout before we walked over it. It was absolutely spectacular to see. It was refreshing to see the law of real estate being broken (“God ain’t making more of it”). We were able to get really close to the lava flow, and we sacrificed a couple of bread sticks to Pele. My only regret was NOT HAVING MARSHMALLOWS. So if you ever go to the Big Island, REMEMBER MARSHMALLOWS AND FIVE-FOOT SKEWERS! I tell you that would be “the shit” to eat lava-roasted marshmallows! Another cool thing in addition to standing five feet from actual lava was the hike. Imagine walking two miles over broken glass IN THE

DARK! Wow! I wish you could've heard the crunching below my Tevas.

The campsite I was staying at was occupied by two college groups. There are actually classes that take students hiking and exploring the islands of Fiji and Hawaii for 6 to 16 weeks! I met one of these students and told her about my travel experiences and also how much fun hitching can be. She had never really hitchhiked before, so she asked for permission to leave the group and hitch with me to go see Boiling Pots. Boiling Pots is a waterfall on the Big Island that appears to be boiling as it lands in the water. Again, this was a sight to see.

Well, I'm back on Oahu waiting for my plane to take off tomorrow on Easter Sunday. There is a saying that wherever you go, there you are, but hmmm... I just don't buy it at all. Kauai is the shit! I have never seen so many happy people in my life in one location. On the contrary, the usual mood of the mainland permeates Oahu more than I would like it to. It is lacking the "aloha" that Kauai and the Big Island have. If I can offer any advice, it would be to avoid Oahu as much as possible. Most people think of Honolulu or Waikiki when they think of Hawaii. But let me tell you that the lesser-known islands have more of the

Hawaiian spirit. That is because they are not as well known. It makes total logical sense. Some things are best kept a secret.

I hope I have inspired you to come to Kauai and live and experience it on the same deep level as I did. If I come back to the United States, I will relocate to Kauai for sure. For now, I'm going to travel until my money runs out. Fortunately, I have the same amount of money as I started with in October. That includes spending the US \$4,000 on the surgery performed in February. In other words, **YOU DON'T NEED A PILE OF MONEY TO DO WHAT I HAVE BEEN DOING FOR THE PAST FIVE MONTHS!!!** It will be interesting to see how long I can last. Most people say I should be able to go forever, or for at least 10 years. I'm still thinking of two years, but sometimes I bump it up to three years when people ask how long I'm going to be gone. I have met a few people who have been traveling for ten-to-twenty-plus years. They have smiles on their faces, and there is one on my face too.

There are now over 90 people on this mailing list. I'm not too sure I know or remember everyone on the list. People are actually e-mailing me with requests for the next update! So here it is, in its poorly proofread state, just like

the rest of the updates. (Proofreading has been done for this published version.) I hope that you have enjoyed the segment on Hawaii.

With lots of Aloha!

Jeremy

Travel Note 6: Fiji

June 6, 2000

BULA!!

That is how they say hello in Fijian! Fiji was quite different from Kauai, but also an interesting place to stay. There really wasn't much to do but hang out at the beach and eat. However, just when I was getting motivated to write a boring update to you, things started to heat up in Suva, the capital. You might have been wondering what happened to me while Fiji was having all that trouble. Most travelers would write that nothing has changed. However, as usual I happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. It just so happened that a local Fijian thought it would be a really cool idea to blow up the place I was staying at. And as usual, good fortune saved me from getting hurt! The last time I spoke with you, I was a convicted criminal for "camping without a permit." Today I'm an evacuated American refugee! And so the excitement continues!

First let me tell you about Fiji. This was my first experience in a totally different country. Things run very differently in Fiji. At first, I thought I'd be in trouble for using my "fly first and then worry about a place to stay later" philosophy. However, there was really nothing to worry

about since 50 different travel agents were clawing at my wallet when I first entered the airport in Nadi (pronounced “Nandi”). They all wanted to help me have a good time in Fiji and had many places for me to stay. It was really difficult to take their advice since they clearly worked on commission. I’ve found that you can never trust a person who says, “This time I’m telling you the truth!” If someone says that, the truth is not their standard. However, I took my chances, and I was on a boat in four hours to go the remote Yasawa Island Group.

A good majority of the islands in the Yasawa Group are geared to backpackers. The going rate is a fixed price of F\$35 per day, which includes three meals per day plus teatime. Since there were two Fijian dollars to one US dollar, it is a pretty good deal. If you work out the math, that’s around US\$500 to \$600 per month or about one-half what I was paying for RENT in Greenwich. It is pretty cool and a relief to know I can live so cheaply in paradise, and I don’t have to do any work either. One of the problems with coming from a wealthy country with a strong dollar and looking different from the natives is the constant nickel-and-dimeing that goes on. Luckily, it is only nickels and dimes in terms of what we actually pay. For instance, tea comes with every meal except lunch. If you want tea

after lunch it costs 50 cents. But that really translates to 25 cents. Sometimes you think, “What’s the point of even charging?” But it’s a poor country and 50 cents is a lot of money for the locals. So you pay it without thinking. In the end, it’s only nickels and dimes, or in this case quarters.

So I’m at Fisherman’s Wharf four hours after booking a reservation with a travel agent who was “telling me the truth this time” about where to stay. I was waiting for a boat that goes to the island of Wayalailai. It was a small wooden boat used for carrying cargo and people. I’ve read about these boats in Indonesia, but I never really thought that it would be as bad they said! They ended up putting 20 people in a 20-foot boat. Somehow we didn’t sink and there was just enough room to fit us all inside while the locals rode outside at the front. I remember singing a made-up song to myself to the melody of “Leaving on a Jet Plane”:

I’m leaving on a wooden boat

And I don’t know if it’s gonna float....

It wasn’t that bad in retrospect... but that was because nothing went wrong. When we arrived on the island we were greeted with guitar players and singers who sang Fijian songs in beautiful harmony. It was exciting, and

somehow felt like it was the island welcome I was missing in Hawaii.

Most of my American friends will think that quitting my job so I could travel for a year or so was extreme, far out, weird, crazy, beyond testosterone, or just plain stupid. However, in just about any European or other English-speaking country, it is the norm to go on an extended trip before, after, or even during college. They call this travel period “Gap Year.”

So let me tell you about the backpacker scene. It consists of two major elements:

1. Cheap accommodation
2. Transportation to each place.

In Fiji, the transportation is done in boats. In New Zealand, there are buses that will take you from backpacker hostel to backpacker hostel (www.kiwiexperience.com). These places are filled with “heaps” of European backpackers. Luckily for me, the language standard is American... oops... I mean, English. Most of the backpackers are going east around the world. Since I’m going west around the world, I can change my tickets a lot easier. This came in handy when I decided to leave Fiji a little earlier than planned! I can also get the

scoops on where to go, or more importantly, where not to go. Also, the Big Mac index gets cheaper as I go west! Let me explain “Burgernomics.” This is a term coined by the *Economist* magazine. I learned about it while hitching on the Big Island. They measure the cost of living and the strength of the American dollar in terms of the price of a Big Mac from country to country. (You can see the latest list at: <http://www.economist.com/content/big-mac-index>).

Many travelers run out of money when the cost of living gets higher and higher! I on the other hand will be able to make my dollar stretch more and more as I have less and less of it. I have also figured out why most Europeans hate America. That is because they all fly into L.A. at the very end of their trip. By that time they are short of money and are stuck in L.A. for 10-12 days before they fly back home! Yikes!!! I try to tell them that L.A. is the armpit of America. Unfortunately, they tell me that they will go somewhere else in the U.S.A. the next time they take a year off and fly around the world. Yeah, right! Even with the unlikelihood of that, I’ve met some people who are on their second or third trip around the world! So it was high season for Fiji when I got there. Heaps of travelers came from New Zealand as it was starting to get cold. Yup... winter is just

beginning Down Under. Who would have ever “thunk” that winter was summer and summer was winter? And I thought I was sooo cool by hanging out in Hawaii for so long and avoiding Old Man Winter! Do birds actually fly north in New Zealand? Anyway, Fiji is a really hot country, and I loved *almost* every minute of it.

My second island was Waya. I stayed at a place called Adi’s (“Andi’s”). It is a lot more chill than the last place I stayed at and they give you more food too! The travel agent didn’t “tell me the truth” that time. There were better places to stay at. Some places have generators and other places have kerosene lamps. Adi’s was a cross between Gilligan’s Island and Fantasy Island. There were absolutely no signs of civilization. Kava was drunk from coconut shells and there was a radio that also had batteries that never seemed to wear out! It must be an island thing! Lying around on the beach all day was the usual entertainment. A boat would come in every day between 3:00 and 5:00 p.m. with new visitors. That was the real excitement on the island! Quite often we would joke around and say, “Zee boat, zee boat!!” when the boat was seen in the distance. I also had a fantasy come true. You see, we were playing cards during the marathon rain that lasted a week. I taught a bunch of people how to play poker and we were soon playing poker

for shells and coral (which had no value). Poker was hardly the fantasy, though. The real fantasy was to play poker with a cigar in my mouth as I said, “I schee your five and raise you ten!” with a muffled Humphrey Bogart voice caused by a stinky cigar hanging out of my mouth. In the end, the taste in my mouth was not so good. Sometimes fantasies are best left to the imagination!!!

There are two things that Fijians take seriously-- singing and rugby. I was able to witness them doing both, but attending the yearly church choir contest was the most interesting. These choirs are not like the choirs you see on the mainland of the United States. They all sing in four-part harmony with different canons throughout. If you ever get a chance to go to Fiji, the church is one thing that should not be missed.

So picture this, over fifty different villages from many different islands come to participate. They are practicing anywhere and anytime they can. In other words, you can go into the village and hear a different choir singing in any of the four directions at any time of the day or night. It was very beautiful and it definitely tickled my spine. So the contest begins and everyone is piled into the church. In addition to the front doors of this single one-room church,

there were four doors on each side. Now imagine everyone peeping through each door, with little kids jumping up in the air so they can catch a split visual second to go along with the never-ending harmonic sounds. Everyone is in full uniform except one or two from each choir who could not find or hold onto their colored bow tie. They would line up in a single file and then the conductor would come out. Those conductors bold enough would stand on a table that gave them a height of nine or so feet. There were many teams, and we ended up leaving after the tenth or so choir had their chance to show off what they had. According to the locals, the concert/contest lasted until 5:00 in the morning! Luckily, I had a chance to see the choir that won the contest earlier that night.

Outside the church (which is the central landmark for each village), you could hear the clinging and clanging of an industrial-strength mortar and pestle. Fijians use this to pulverize kava into a fine powder so it can be mixed into a drink. Kava is one other thing that is taken very seriously. This is a drink that is supposed to have some type of relaxing effect. However, most visitors say it tastes like muddy water and makes your mouth tingle. I would have to agree with the Western majority. The first time you drink it, it is for the cultural experience. Afterwards, it is to

humor the natives. It seems that the Fijians drink 10-15 cups of this stuff each night. I don't care even if it is water! I can't drink that much of anything! Nevertheless, Fijians love kava, and it's their unofficial national currency.

Life was pretty simple on Fiji. The schedule was as follows:

Wake up and wait for breakfast.

Eat breakfast.

Lie on the beach and wait for lunch.

Eat lunch.

Lie on the beach (swim, read, snorkel) and wait for the boat to come in.

Say, "Zee boat, zee boat!!"

Greet the new people from the boat and drink tea with them.

Lie on the beach (swim, read, snorkel) and wait for dinner.

Eat dinner, talk, sing, play guitar, and then go to bed.

This was the simple life on the remote islands of Fiji. I had many opportunities to interact with the locals, and they seemed to be much happier than the people who lived on

the mainland. I always told myself that things were changing for the worse as money infiltrated these islands. Things were changing too quickly for them to safely adjust. Greed was a terrible sickness that was invading these seemingly free souls.

My last two days on the remote islands were spent at a backpacker resort called Octopus. I only stayed two nights because someone decided to blow it up. Can you say “kaboom”? Here’s how it started. There was trouble in Suva and we were immediately notified of the events. The international phone lines were not working, and the owner requested our passport numbers to await a response from our embassies. The next day there was still trouble in Suva. I thought I was quite safe on the island of Waya. Since Suva was quite far away and on a different island, I compared it to being in Connecticut during the L.A. riots. In fact, the American Consulate’s instructions recommended travelers on the remote islands to stay put for a while. Later that day, a local cut the gas lines in the kitchen, and the place was firebombed. There were several explosions but no one was hurt. Within one hour, everyone was on an evacuation boat headed for another island. Here is an entry from my journal describing what happened that day:

Well, I spent my first day away from Octopus at Dive Trek. Some people who were pissed off and wanted to cause some trouble had torched Octopus. I remember it quite clearly. I was snorkeling, and when I came out of the water I heard this big boom and a couple of people scream. Then I looked up and saw the orange flames engulf the main hut and the surrounding trees. It was funny, because the first thought that came to my mind was my possessions being destroyed at that moment. I had a book and a sarong that I left at the bar/eating area. They were instantly burnt and I said to Jim (the manager), “My books!!! My books!!” I even contemplated running into the “open bar” to try to recover it. Jim told me that there were some gas tanks in the building and they would blow up at any moment. He also told me it was useless at this point and too late to do anything. Jim would have been able to put out the fire had the arsonist not taken the fire extinguisher. I never thought about Jim losing his job. I never thought about the owners from New Zealand who were counting on retiring here.

I remember asking the locals what had caused the fire and how it happened. They were very quiet with stern looks on their faces. They said nothing. Immediately, I knew that someone had caused the fire and that it was not just a kitchen fire. The manager and the owner were present that day, and they knew the person who had done it and how it happened. They also were arranging for all of us to leave the island as soon as possible and said we should pack up our tents and belongings. I packed up my tent and some other people's tents as well. I managed to lose my poles and stakes but found them later. A lot of the people were rushing and panicking. People were throwing any visible bags along with themselves into the departing boats. The boats were overloaded with gear and people. There was an American getting very upset over the fact that we did not have a CB or any life jackets. The boat looked like it was about to sink. This was actually the norm in Fiji, but he did have something to complain about. It would be a shame to die in a boat after surviving an arson attack!

He ended up taking a different boat, and we were all transferred to Wayalailai as the sun went down. I ended up getting totally soaked while trying to keep the boat close to shore as we loaded the people and gear off. When everything was finished, we were told that dinner would be ready and an emergency tent was being built for us. They also had an open bar for all Octopus residents, and many people were quite burned out the next morning.

On that next morning we were told that we would be brought back to Nadi. We would receive two free nights' accommodation with a \$50 food voucher per night. Believe it or not, the owner had "civil unrest insurance" and we were covered under the policy. I called my parents early in the morning the next day when the phone lines were less likely to be tied up. I was going to let them know that everything was all right, but that was not the main topic of the day. No one was at home when I called, so I called my mother's cell phone. My uncle answered, which was strange, and it turned out the whole family was at the hospital too. My grandfather was incoherent and dying. He was riding out his last few hours of a long and grueling fight with lymphoma. I was hardly aware it had gotten that

bad since he had won his first battle this past fall. So the family was there to say their last words to him. Coincidentally, I was there too. This ended up being the most intense phone call I had in my life.

Things have changed in my travels. I've realized that life goes on (or ceases while I'm gone). I have a different outlook on my travels. New Zealand is not as fun as I had hoped. I'm planning on skipping Australia and going straight to India or Thailand from here. I plan on getting back into seriously studying Buddhism and executing my original itinerary. It has been a nice break, and I have learned quite a lot. My computer is on the fritz these days. It was perfectly fine even though my bags were thrown all over the place during the evacuation. However, after I was safely in New Zealand, I accidentally knocked it off my bed and now the screen is cracked. Soon the screen will get darker and darker until it is not usable anymore. I will welcome that day since it will relieve me of my travel note duties!

Moce (pronounced "Mothe"). Goodbye in Fijian)

Jem

Travel Note 7: New Zealand

July 15, 2000

Hello from New Zealand

I remember my father showing me the exemption clause in his life insurance policy. It stated that if the policyholder was killed while doing certain sports, the policy would become null and void. The sports listed were rock climbing, sky diving, scuba diving, hang gliding, and whitewater rafting. My father showed me this list out of concern since I had done all of these before age twenty. Had the underwriters gone to New Zealand, they might have added bungee jumping, white water surfing, dam sledding, canyoning, glacier climbing, and black water tubing! Kiwis (New Zealanders) market their country as a place where extreme adventure sports and natural scenic beauty are in abundance. Having experienced New Zealand for nearly one month, I can say that there are great truths in their marketing and very few litigation lawyers as well!

I hung out in Auckland for a few days before I decided to do anything. I needed time to relax and rethink things after the Fiji incident and, more importantly, my grandfather's death. We were close and there was not

much I could have done for him except to continue traveling. That is what he wanted me to do, as my mother told me. I really wanted to hitchhike in New Zealand since I heard that it was the easiest place to hitch. However, I didn't want to deal with the cold rain and snow which was abundant, as the Kiwi winter was just kicking off.

There is a bus called "The Kiwi Experience." They have one of the best marketing programs around. EVERY TRAVEL AGENT WAS PUSHING THEM and many walls and hallways in nearly every backpacker hostel were dedicated to their bus trips. After some thought, I gave in to the hard-sell marketing and was off to the northernmost part of New Zealand, Cape Reinga. North is where the warm weather is, and after everything I had just experienced, I didn't want to be where it was cold.

Cape Reinga was quite cool. There is a beach called Ninety Mile Beach. It is 50 or 60 miles long, but "Ninety Mile" sounds better, doesn't it? The interesting part of the trip was that the bus ACTUALLY drove on this beach for the whole length. Not only did they drive on it, but they drove in the water too. Imagine driving sixty or so miles along a beach with water spraying onto both sides of the bus. OK... actually the first 10 minutes or so was cool, but then it was

just like another Greyhound bus ride. Nearing the end of the beach, we stopped at some sand dunes and grabbed our boogie boards. This was actually the highlight of the trip. We climbed up 300-500 foot sand dunes and then we boogie boarded down! It was something I never imagined could be done, but it was the norm in Kiwi Land.

Before I went to New Zealand, I had nearly completed my “before I die” list of things I wanted to do. Most of the list was similar to the exemption list of my father’s life insurance policy. One unfinished item was swimming with the dolphins. Swimming with the dolphins was a great experience and I recommend it to just about anyone. What happens when you swim with the dolphins? First, you must go on a boat and try to find them. After the boat finds them, you entice the dolphins to surf on the bow wake. This is one of their favorite things to do. When it looked like they would hang around for a little while, we put on our mask, snorkel, and fins and slid into the water. We had to make funny sounds (squeaky and clicking noises) for the dolphins to stay interested in us. Otherwise they would get bored and swim away. Yes! Even dolphins have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). I must say that it was quite interesting to see a bunch of tourists swimming around in the water singing “deep, dop dop dop dop dop”

over and over again. But it worked for those who had no shame.

The next exciting thing I did on the North Island was go black water tubing down a river in Waitomo. This is a wet cave where some sections are traveled in inner tubes. This is not your everyday pay-ten-dollars-and-go-tubing-down-the-local-river event. You get a full seven mil (very thick) wet suit, a helmet with a waterproof coal miner's light, a genuine inner tube, and two very experienced guides who make sure everyone gets through safely. The trip started off with a backwards jump down a small waterfall. The next thing I knew I was looking around and seeing the tall cave walls complete with stalagmites and glowworms. It was beyond beautiful. The next time someone is selling their collection of National Geographic magazines at a tag sale, flip to one of the issues that has pictures of caves. You might even find an issue that deals with New Zealand! Let me tell you, if I had a two thousand dollar camera, I would have felt just like a National Geographic photographer! Unfortunately, I only had a twenty dollar (US\$10) disposable waterproof camera with no flash. I was out of luck for documenting what I saw. But that's all right, I have learned that mental memory pictures do much more justice than even two thousand

dollar cameras can do. I guess you'll be "left in the dark" (hee hee hee) about what it actually looked like!

When the trip was over, the group took a hot shower to warm up. Since we were all in the shower room at the same time, someone had a great idea of suggesting we sing a song. I quickly belted out "a-wimoweh, a-wimoweh, a-wimoweh, a-wimoweh, a-wimoweh," and the rest of the group followed while I sang the lead to "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." It was something that helped warm our souls after getting out of the cold water.

We went to several locations along the North Island, but they were not that much fun since cold rain is the norm for this time of the year. So I decided to push on through and try to get to the South Island as quickly as possible. I remember the ferry ride down to the South Island very clearly. I don't think I will ever forget it. My original fast and "small" ferry got canceled due to the five-meter wave limit. This left me with no other choice than to take the big, expensive, and slow three-hour inter-island ferry instead.

Now this vessel was hardly a boat. It was nearly the same size as the QE2 cruise ship or your average container ship. When the captain introduced himself on the loud speaker

he said, “As some of you may know, the conditions are quite bad. In fact, they are just about as bad as they get. I recommend that you go to the back of the boat if you would like a smoother ride.” Being the adventurer, I made my way to the front along with the other crazy kiwis. The first twenty minutes was really cool. The bow would go over a five or six meter swell, then dip down while the next swell would crash over the bow, spraying the windows nearly 50 feet above! It was great for a while, and you could probably hear the cheers back on shore as each of these swells thumped the boat. However, after a while it got old, and the stomachs in the front of the boat started to get a little queasy.

It made me think of the scene in the movie *Stand by Me* when the fat boy gets his revenge by making everyone puke up their lunch. It didn’t happen, but we were surfing the edge of that as each swell hit us. Perhaps that was worse. I bumped into a lady as I was drifting around the boat looking for a friend who also wasn’t feeling well. This woman was looking out the window, focusing on the horizon to keep herself centered. When I asked if she was feeling sick too, she replied, “I felt sick when my stomach was full,” implying that she had recently been on her knees praying to the porcelain water god. I too got very

close to that point until I figured out the secret to not getting seasick. “So what’s the secret?” you ask. Lie down and close your eyes. That’s it! It brought me back to the times when I was a lit’l ol’ baby boy and people would swing and sway me to sleep. It was strange that something that can make you sick to your stomach can be flipped around into something that can be very relaxing and soothing! In any case, pay five dollars more and take the twenty-minute flight!

The hike at Franz Josef Glacier Park was a full-day adventure. This was something that was beyond beautiful and something you read about in National Geographic. National Geographic seemed to be the underlying theme of the whole New Zealand trip. The tour company picked us up at the hostel and gave us special jackets, boots, socks, talons (crampons), and an ice ax. We hopped on their bus and headed to the base of the glacier. Once we got onto the ice, we were told to put on our talons.

Talons are spiked outer soles that hook onto the bottom of most hiking boots. These devices allow you to safely travel on glacier ice without slipping and falling. In retrospect, these would be great for the muddy Kalalau trail in Kauai! When I first put these things on, I felt like my boots were

attached to lead weights. After I became comfortable with them, I felt a little bit like Freddy Kruger's lower half!

We traveled nearly six kilometers up the glacier. Our guide, whom we paid handsomely, was busy carving footholds in the cliff's edges for us. Words cannot describe the blue ice caves, crevasses, and peaks we walked over, through, and up on. It was breathtaking, and boy, was I out of breath at the end of the day!

There are several extreme sports that New Zealand made famous. None is more famous than bungee jumping. When I was in college, I did a hundred-foot bungee jump over a stuntman's air mattress at "Action Park." A Yawner! If one is up to it, one can jump "The Nevis." Oooh, that sounds sooo scary, doesn't it? Well, it should be! It is a 132-meter (440 feet) jump into a nearly empty river bed canyon (www.ajhackett.com).

The jump was canceled earlier due to high winds but later started again when the winds supposedly died down (they hadn't). The jump site was absolutely ridiculous. Even the British jumpers were in awe of the lack of litigation prevention in this multi-million-dollar operation. The disclaimer form said, "We, the undersigned, understand

that bungee jumping could permanently change our life!”
That was all it said!

The Nevis has a cable car system that brings you out to a suspended platform. Since the winds were blowing nearly 50 miles per hour, the platform was swaying back and forth. When I did the 100-foot jump in the States, it was quick and easy. This one was like nothing I ever imagined. Finally, it was my turn to jump.

The moment I jumped I thought, “OK, when is this bungee thing going to catch?... A few seconds later, thinking it would never catch, I screamed, “Holy shit!!!” Finally, I felt the gentle tug on my feet as I was brought to a complete stop and then was shot upward for another free fall back down. Yikes!!! I’ll promise never do that one again, Mom!! But I’m glad I did it! If you are up to it, there is a jump in South Africa that extends over two hundred meters.

The last part of my trip was spent hang gliding and jet boating down the Shotover River. As some of you may or may not know, hang gliding was my lifelong dream. Believe it or not, I would have never gone to college if there hadn’t been a hang gliding club. I chose my university based on that! At college, I learned how to hang

glide, but I was never skilled enough to jump off a cliff like in the Wrigley Gum commercial.

Do you remember that one from the 80's? Everything is silent. A man takes a stick of gum and slides it into his mouth. As it goes into his mouth, it bends and folds its way inside. He takes a couple of chews and then steps off a cliff with his hang glider while a soothing Wrigley's jingle plays in the background. I was a kid back then and my jaw went to the floor in awe every time I saw this commercial. This was my dream ever since. (You can see one version of this commercial at: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=fJ87pBjQt0k>).

When I saw the hang gliding brochure with the mountains below, I thought, "Here is my chance!" and I signed up.

The next day the instructor and I ended up taking the hang glider up to the top of a ski slope. Imagine waiting in line for a ski chair lift and they stop so two people can get on with their hang glider! Nothing is out of the norm in Kiwi Land. Remember, this is the land where you can boogie board down white water rivers! The hang gliding was scenic and part of a dream come true, but damn! I wish I had the gum. I was even able to take the controls for a while. If you are interested, I believe this can be done at

Morningside Hang-Gliding School in New Hampshire, where I learned (<http://flymorningside.kittyhawk.com/>).

The Shotover Jet (www.shotoverjet.com) is a jet boat that swoops and spins down the Shotover River canyon at 70 km/h. The driver skillfully drives it inches from the canyon walls. I don't know how they do it without crashing, but the boats didn't have any scratches! It was pretty fun, but I imagine it would be much more enjoyable in the Kiwi summer (December to March). When we were done, the back of my life jacket had ice on it!

I've spent nearly four weeks traveling on a bus called "The Kiwi Experience." It drops people off at various different hostels as it travels around the country. It is a neat concept that is foreign to America. I later found out that there was another competing bus called "The Magic Bus." This is the same concept except the passengers are slightly older and they don't get "pissed" (drunk) every night. Had the booking agent been interested in my welfare rather than his commission, I would have taken the Magic Bus instead. The people who go on these buses are encouraged to try high-thrill extreme sports. After doing some of these trips, I'm convinced that there are no lawyers in New Zealand! They would have a field day here! Some of these

extreme sports don't seem possible in the States. For instance, what kind of hydroelectric operation would allow people to go sledding down the side of their dam?

In any case, if you are going to New Zealand, stick to the South Island. You'll save a lot of time, worries, and money. Everyone will agree that the South Island is by far more beautiful, and all the activities can be done in Queenstown. Someone told me this before I went, but I didn't listen. Both islands are nice, scenic, beautiful, and any similar adjective listed in the thesaurus. Nevertheless, I still think Kauai is tops. This island just ain't got that magic, that feeling-- what we Hawaiians call *mana*.

I will be going to Australia in a few days. I will probably do a long-awaited Goenka retreat (www.dhamma.org) when I get there. I am very excited about getting back on the original Buddhist track and out of travel mode. I sometimes forget that I'm a spiritual seeker. I find it very difficult to keep up a meditation practice while traveling on a low budget. There are few places and times where one can be alone (and dry) to meditate. Even though I've done many exciting things, I still find peace and refuge in meditation, and that is my real favorite thing to do. Overall, I still feel that the monasteries in the first part of

my trip were the best part of the trek. It is hard to believe that I've been gone since October!

Aloha (who cares if they don't say it here)

Jeremy

Travel Note 8: Oz & Hong Kong

August 7, 2000

G'day

There is a much-repeated saying in America, “Toto, I don’t think that we’re in Kansas anymore!” said by Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*. Oz, as they call it, is another name for Australia. Although I was tempted to say I wasn’t in Kansas anymore, I really felt like Oz was not much different from the States.

I flew into Sydney, which is the largest city in Oz. As in any large city, people tended to be uptight, unfriendly, and interested in minding their own business. Inflation was about to skyrocket because of the Olympics, and a new 15% sales tax (GST) was about to be imposed as well. The locals had a lot to be upset with. As I was about to book a ticket immediately out of the country, I said to myself, “Is this the same situation where foreigners fly into L.A., stay for a week, and then leave thinking that America blows chunks?” With that in mind, after a couple of unspectacular days in Sydney, I hopped on a 15-hour hell-ride bus trip to the famous Byron Bay and other places. “Could Oz be just like America with a little bit of ‘twang’ in the accent?” Next to sitting a 10-day meditation course

and finding out the meaning of life, answering that question was my mission in Oz rather than finding the Wizard.

The town or so-called city of Byron Bay is noted for a relaxed hippie community complete with a full assortment of tarot card readers, aural photography centers, float tanks, and “artsy-fartsy” movie theaters. When I hopped off the bus, representatives from five or six different hostels met me. They were holding signs that were blown-up brochures explaining why they were better than those of the guy/gal next to them. The old “eenee-meenee-miny-mo-cuz-I’m-burnt-from-the-bus-ride-tired-and-running-out-of-time” had me end up at the Backpackers Inn. Luck had it that I was in a nice hostel with chill roommates, and the place was conveniently located right by the beach. The rumors were true. Byron Bay was a town where people were relaxed, smiled for no particular reason, and said hello to people they’ve never seen before. That is my type of place, not to mention the bakery called The Grateful Bread. For some reason, the hostels of Byron Bay were hard up for people, while Sydney and Brisbane were all nearly fully booked. Go figure?

So while in Byron, I decided to go for the float and massage package. Here you get a full one-hour massage along with a one-hour float as well. We are not talking a scoop of ice cream in a mug of root beer type of float. Rather, this is the same type of flotation tank you may or may have not seen in the movie *Altered States*. If you haven't seen the movie (neither have I), here is what it's like. There is a tank that is constantly heated to body temperature. It has some mineral additives (let's face it, chemicals) that allow you to effortlessly float. The chamber is completely closed and there is no light inside. Basically, you can't really feel or see anything, including your own body. It was a cool experience... or shall we say, lukewarm? The one-hour massage and one-hour float for forty Oz bucks was a deal that cannot ever be seen in the States. When you figure in the exchange rate (similar to but better than Canada's), you really cannot go wrong.

So on my way to Relax Haven, where I had the massage, I noticed a movie theater in the middle of nowhere. It was named The Byron Underground Movie Theatre, appropriately since no one really knows about it. But that's the cool part. They play "artsy-fartsy" foreign flicks as well as video discourses from enlightened masters for five dollars each. After I paid for me ticket (that's Oz

grammar), I was offered a cup of free chāi tea to take inside the theater! There are around fifty or so seats, yet only about five to ten people seem to watch each movie at a time. There were pillows and blankets available if you wanted to lie down on the floor and watch.

Even if the movies are no good, I'd still recommend it for the experience. The owners carefully choose movies. I saw a movie called *White Cat Black Cat* and another called *Kamikaze Taxi Driver*. They were both excellent. Afterwards, we would indulge in yet some more cups of chāi and talk about the movies and life with the owners, Amanda and Chris. "We don't like to make friends with someone and then charge them for a cup of chāi," says Amanda. Within an hour of meeting the owners, you wonder why people are not knocking down the doors to get in. You immediately want this place to succeed. You want to tell everyone you know (like I'm doing now in this letter). That is how good it is. That was the vibe I felt after the movie theater experience.

The next day I went on a bus tour of Nimbin. Now Nimbin is a freaky town. This is a town where drugs are unofficially legal. It is almost like the scenery outside a Grateful Dead show where people openly ask you if you want any

“smokes” or “cookies.” Although it was interesting to see, I don’t think it is a place you’d like to stay. Getting there was half the fun. Do you remember the bus driver from *The Simpsons*? Me bus driver was sort of like him. I was the last to get on the bus, so I ended up having to sit in the front. I guess everybody knew about the driver! Every so often, I would see the tires touch the edge of the road when we went around some sharp curves. At first, I thought it was the angle at which I was sitting, but then I started to feel the rumble of the edge of the road beneath us. After a while, I noticed that the cars going in the other direction were doing the same thing. I guess that was the driving standard near a town where drugs were unofficially legal.

There are two things different in Oz than in America besides the way they speak: the toilets and the way they walk on the streets. The toilets down under (including Fiji and New Zealand) are absolutely amazing. They do not have any handles for flushing. It took me a while to figure out the correct way to flush. The toilets have two buttons. They are not labeled, but I got the hang of it rather quickly. “Number one and number two.” The only thing that still confuses me is how one “jiggles the handle!” The urinals are quite different too. Basically, you pee on the wall and

the gutter system collects it. I guess this is where the phrases “off the wall” and “pissed off” came from. Some of the fancy troughs actually have a grated floor with a pee gutter underneath you. Feet, don’t fail me now!

The next thing that really threw me off (and still does) is the fact that they drive on the left side of the road. I cannot tell you how many times I have almost been killed while crossing the street! You’d assume that people would also walk on the left side of the sidewalk. Nope... The right then? Nope... Total chaos rules the sidewalks. If I were carrying a jar of peanut butter, I’m sure I would have gotten me peanut butter in someone else’s chocolate!

I have met a number of Canadian backpackers. Did you know that they hate to be called Americans? Some actually sew maple leaf patches on their bags so people do not make that mistake. When travelling never ask someone with what sounds like an American accent what state they are from. Since most Americans do not backpack around the world, chances are you will be asking a Canadian. You will learn your lesson quickly that Canada has provinces instead of states!

I ended up doing the Goenka 10-day retreat in a town just north of Brisbane. Believe it or not, there is a lot to be said

about a silent retreat. I learned many things about myself, human nature, and Oz wildlife as well. My mother warned me that staying at meditation centers and monasteries would prevent me from seeing the countries I was visiting. I'm happy to say that I proved her wrong. I was greeted at sunrise and sunset with the kookaburra call. This is the trademark "don't leave me alone in the jungle because it's starting to get dark" noise heard in many American movies and sitcoms. I was also able to get really close to some "local" kangaroos. They were play fighting with each other. It was something you think you'd only see on the Nature Channel. They would start by slapping each other with their paws. Then they would start to drop kick each other while keeping their balance on their tails. Even my yoga teacher would be impressed with this maneuver! It was really cool to see. Unfortunately, picture taking is forbidden at the retreat center, and even though I was tempted, there are no pictures as documentation. The sunset on the eighth day was something to write home about too.

The sunsets in northern Oz are very different from anywhere else. The cloud formations are very fractal-like with three dimensions to them as well. On the eighth day of the retreat, everybody was gazing at one of those lovely

sunsets. They were in silent admiration because the retreat center's rule is "noble silence." That is, no one is allowed to talk or even make eye contact. There was no way to say, "Hey, that was a beautiful sunset!" to the guy next to you. All you could do was appreciate it silently, knowing that everyone else was thinking the same thing. I've learned that sometimes silence can express an even greater appreciation for things. Nevertheless, since they had served a spicy bean dish earlier that day and I was outside, I had to let one rip. Since the rule was "noble silence," it was, shall we say, nobly silent... but deadly! You'd think that I wouldn't keep anything to myself after that note, but there were other moments that are too precious to share.

I recently had a change in travel plans. The original plan was to fly into Singapore and then make my way through Burma (now officially known as Myanmar) Thailand etc. Later I would go over to Nepal and then down to India. After India, I would go back to Thailand to study Buddhism in one form or another for an extended time. I decided it would be more logical to go to India first and work the same route in reverse order, leaving Thailand at the end for a single visit.

One of my friends from back home invited me to “swing by” and meet him in Hong Kong. I told him, “Been there, done that (in ‘93), and it’s too expensive anyway. “Swing by” Hong Kong!! Sheesh!!! So I’m booking my flight to India and it turns out that Cathay Pacific Airlines had the cheapest flight from Brisbane and also a MANDATORY STOPOVER in Hong Kong. An even funnier thing is that I caught a parasite while in Oz two days before heading to India via Hong Kong. My teachers at school used to tell me I was always one step ahead of myself, but this was ridiculous! Although I plan on being holier than a cow in India, chewing me own cud was not a part of me agenda! It seems logical to be healthy BEFORE going to India. Therefore, I will be staying in Hong Kong for a little longer than expected. Even though I told you about my nobly silent moments, I’ll spare you the other symptoms I experienced before, during, and after my ten-hour flight to Hong Kong! If you are ever sick, do yourself a favor and take the next flight when you are well!

So I’m staying in Hong Kong for a little longer than expected while trying to literally get my shit together! The medication seems to be working, but I have to be off it for a few days before I really know if it completely did the trick. My stay here has been very pleasant. I got to see my

old friend from back home and I've made two new ones as well. Believe it or not, Hong Kong has been my vacation from my vacation. You see, I'm not cooped up in a little apartment with cars barking and air conditioners hissing at me 24/7. I'm staying on this island called Lama. It's the Hong Kong away from Hong Kong. No cars are allowed here, and there is the cutest little village right off of the ferry pier. Imagine a cute Chinatown if you would. The island is known for its ex-pat community. It is complete with a western-style organic vegetarian restaurant called The Bookworm. They even have a café called the Deli Lama. People here also pass the "hello test." That is, when I say hello to a total stranger for no particular reason, they properly respond on the first try. Grunting, as done in Sydney, is cause for immediate failure.

There are certain things that can be noted about Hong Kong, like umbrella wars and cell phones. I first learned about umbrella wars while walking in the Lama village. However, that was only a pilot test for downtown Hong Kong during rush hour! This is how it works. It rains all the time in the summer, and everyone has an umbrella. The trick is to get down the street with your umbrella still open. Everyone is raising and lowering their umbrellas like the horses in a carousel so that the umbrella tops do not

impact each other. The problem occurs when both parties raise their umbrellas at the same time. This will cause an impact with droplets flying off from the centrifugal force as the umbrella cap spins several revolutions. I've actually seen someone get poked in the eye. He was upset, but everyone must be on guard.

The cell phone phenomenon has totally gone out of control from the last time I was here in '93. Then, people were using cell phones like they are currently used in the States. You know... one person here and there talking on the street every once in a while. The usage has gone way up, and I'm sure you will see this increase in the States. A recent newspaper article stated that seventy percent of all adults have cell phones. Just about everyone I met had a cell phone with enormous airtime budgets. Cell phones are used all the time – on the streets, ferries, and trams. If you ever felt like you were a slave to your pager, e-mail, or phone, just wait until everyone has a cell phone and the rates are cheaper. Just wait until it's your main form of communication. People in HK will actually get upset if you don't use your cell phone (that means you need to turn it on and carry it with you). One good thing about this phenomenon is that there are very few pay phones. It is quite common to see stores and shops having regular

phones available for anybody to use. Come to think about it, it would be nice if the stores and shops in the States had this feature as well. Even the Internet can be found for free in some coffee shops.

So I was off in the rain, armed with my umbrella, trying to get a feel for Hong Kong by walking as much of it as I could. This is how I like to get oriented to the cities I visit. In a short while, I found myself in the middle of the Soho district. Imagine a role reversal. You see, there is obviously no Chinatown in Hong Kong. Rather there is a “Westytown,” or Soho district, where Westerners can meet. This consists mostly of pubs and Western restaurants with mostly non-Asian customers in the storefronts. It was quite funny to see.

A fun and inexpensive way to see the city is through the tram system. It only costs two (Hong Kong) dollars. At that rate, they might as well be free since there are nearly eight Hong Kong dollars to every greenback. Using the tram, I made it my goal to find the new library, which was featured on my travel map. I arrived there around 5:30 in the evening. The front door was not accessible so I went into a side door. The place was completely empty and it looked like there was a little bit of construction going on.

When I asked a security guard how one got to the main part of the library, he told me that the library was closed. Not accepting defeat, I asked him when the library would re-open, thinking I would have another quest for the next day. He responded, "Next year." Ooops. I guess the mapmakers were a little too optimistic when they went to press.

Of all the time I spent in Hong Kong, only a few days were actually spent in the city itself. I went to the Portuguese island of Macau on my first day. The second day I spent on Lantau, visiting the world's largest outdoor Buddha. The rest I've spent on this cute little island of Lama. I've been seeing a different Hong Kong than I saw in 1993. I imagine my Hong Kong is a different from the Hong Kong most visitors usually see. It has been a unique opportunity, and I'm glad I had a chance to come before going to India. Well, I must send this off before I complete my Hong Kong adventure or it may not ever get sent. It has been a little longer than usual, and quite frankly, these newsletters have become a ball and chain for me. I like writing them with enthusiasm just as much as you like reading them. However, I feel like I should lay low for a little while. In the future, please expect less content with a deteriorating quality. My laptop is still getting worse, but unfortunately

I'm addicted and the travel notes are still going strong.
With that note, I'll end with a simple good ol' American
"Goodbye."

Jeremy

Travel Note 9: India I

August 31, 2000

Namaste!

That is hello and goodbye in Hindi. India is a place of spirituality, culture, adventure, and enjoyment.

Before coming to India, I had spoken with quite a few travelers who have been here. After talking with them, I decided that India has the same qualities people describe in an LSD experience. It is said that taking LSD the first time, no matter how good or bad the “trip,” is usually a mind-opening experience. People will react to it differently. Some people get overwhelmed and never try it again, while others stay in that “state” for such a long time that it does damage. Yet others take the experience for what it was and leave it at that.

Since the “trip” I’m on is not yet over, I cannot yet say how my final experience will be. As Jerry Garcia used to say, “What a long, strange trip it’s been!” So far India has been overwhelming, but I’m starting to get used to the Indian way of life. I now eat with my hands, have detoxed from my addiction to toilet paper, and have a few easily accessible rupees for the beggars at the train station.

“There is nothing like India” is what most people say. Now that I have visited India, I can vouch for this its validity. When I arrived the airport reminded me of the airport in Fiji. It was hardly modern, and there were people trying to sell me rides and reservations to just about every hotel NOT listed in *Lonely Planet*.

The difference was clearly noticeable when I got in the cab and left the airport. This was when the permanent smile on my face began. Everything was seen through new and different eyes. There were people walking everywhere and a whole slew of cars going up and down the roads. It seemed as though we were all racing each other. Racing for what, I don’t know. Nevertheless, it turned a simple ride into an adventure!

To drive in India you really need three hands – one on the shifter, one on the wheel, and most importantly, one on the horn! There seemed to be no regard for what lane one should stay in. If there is enough room to fit, then it’s a lane. Even which side of the road you stay on is a joke. I’ve been on the right side of the road many times even though the backwards British left-hand-side rules are in effect here.

It happens like this: When the driver is passing someone on the right, someone squeezes in on the left and then pushes the vehicle more to the right. At this point it is your driver's responsibility to get out of the way before you get hit. The only thing one can do is B.A.M. (Beep And Move). Driving in India is similar to the very beginning of a bicycle race or a Boston marathon. Add pedestrians and another race going in the opposite direction and you'll start to get a feel for it.

It's not just cars that travel on the roads. So far I have also seen walkers, cyclists, jeeps, mopeds, motorcycles, buses, auto rickshaws, bicycle rickshaws, horse rickshaws, cows, goats, and even oxcarts. Cows are often found in the streets too. Remember, "Holy cow, Batman!" was an import from India. Krishna loves cows and to kill a cow is one of the worst sins as they are the givers of milk and work.

Auto rickshaws are similar to bicycle rickshaws except they are powered by a 5 to 10 hp diesel scooter. The driver and the rider both have a roof over their head. They reminded me of those little three-wheeled scooter trucks used to haul away my garbage from my house to the bigger garbage truck. I don't think they use them anymore for

garbage, but they still can be found in parks today. They also reminded me of golf carts.

The cool thing about these auto rickshaws is that they have hit the inner-city “Homey!” stage. Some of them have big letters in the back that spell nice American brand names like NIKE or POLO. I’m still waiting to spot one that says TOYOTA. They also come complete with “kickers.” Kickers are those big speakers that fill the entire trunk and vibrate the whole car, or rickshaw in this case. I have heard rickshaw kickers playing the latest Hindi movie soundtracks. The only thing missing is the chain around the license plate! These auto rickshaws are the most visible form of transportation in India.

The food is what India is all about. Many travelers feel that eating in India is like a reversed bulimia. Gorge on this wonderful authentic super-cheap Indian food and then poop or “squirt” it out a few hours later. You don’t have to go to India to be a reversed bulimic either. Just go to your local South Indian restaurant and gorge yourself on a lunch buffet. You’ll soon realize that fire and water CAN exist at the same time! Did I tell you how cheap the food was? There are roughly 45 rupees to the U.S. dollar. A typical meal consisting of a “veggie-whatever” dish, any

type of bread, a bottle of water, and chāi will cost maybe 40 to 50 rupees. This is a buck in layman's terms. Since we are talking about prices, single rooms cost one to six dollars a night, and a train to almost anywhere can cost one to ten dollars! Now let's see. I had quite a bit of money left over the last time I checked... hmmmm... I guess I could retire here! However, there is no need to worry, Mom, because I'm still planning on leaving India to become a monk in Thailand!

The trains are really cool too. There is no need to go to Essex, CT to ride on a vintage train and go absolutely nowhere. In India, you can ride the trains that cannot be a day under 80 or 90 years old, which actually get you where you want to go. Imagine a New York subway train with a big caboose. Take the half charm of a yellow school bus, stick it on a rail car, put iron bars over the windows, leave the doors open even while in motion, and add twice as many people as seats, and you will begin to visualize what it is like.

Visualizing is one thing, but words alone cannot describe the train ride. You need a sound recorder for all the non-passengers who board just to sell you something. It is worse than a peddler on a New York City subway because

they keep going back and forth over and over again. On a subway train you really only see each person once, but in India, they do the hard sell more than a few times.

Besides the beggars, you've got people selling chāi, puffed rice (Indian Rice Krispies), parasitic fruit, candy, sāmōsas, counterfeit mineral water, soda, peanuts, popcorn, potato chips, sandwiches, and chains. Everything can be bought except for toilet paper when you need it the most. If you are going on a long ride, be sure to pop an Imodium A-D pill a few hours before to avoid "THE BATHROOM?" on the train. But it is not the same 20 sellers who pass you by over and over again that makes the ride hard to explain. It's their chants. Imagine you are at a baseball or hockey game. Could you describe the game without the peanuts and crackerjacks guy? And could you describe them without a sound recorder?

"GETCH YIR PEANUTS AND CRACKERJACKS... PEANUTS AND CRACKERJACKS HEEYA (here)" or "HOTDOGS SODAPOP... GETCH YIR HOTDOGS AND SODAPOP! "

They don't just say it or yell it. It resonates. The sound naturally amplifies with little effort by the chanter. Some spiritual chanters pronounce certain sounds that will resonate by themselves. It is like suspension bridges for

cars. The vibrations from the motors of the cars can resonate or amplify to actually cause the bridge to swing, break, and/or flip upside down. Resonation is how a subtle vibration can become so strong. As a kid I used to dip my finger in water and rub it gently around the rim of a crystal glass. The glass would resonate/amplify with that magical sound. But there is more. It's also the rhythm of the chants being repeated over and over. They get louder as they get closer and softer as the chanter passes by. The Doppler effect can be noted as well. I can easily see someone putting some rave tracks to these chants.

As you know, I'm quite a fan of Goenka (see www.dhamma.org) and have done several retreats at his centers in the U.S. and Australia. Dhamma Giri, which is the mother center for his world organization, is not far from Bombay (now known officially as Mumbai) so I decided to give it a visit. The funny thing was that I came to India to see Goenkaji (Goenka) but he ended up visiting the States at the same time. Dhamma Giri was still an eventful visit and their famous pagoda was nice to meditate in. A person I met there told me that the Ajantā Caves near Aurangabād were worth the trip. So a few days later, I was off to Aurangabād. I first went to the lesser-known Ellora Caves, which were worth visiting too. These

caves are not your basic Fred and Wilma caves of *The Flintstones*. Many masters have intricately carved these caves for three to seven hundred years! I saw one Hindu cave that took over seven hundred years to complete, and it shows it too!

The next day I was off to the world-famous Ajantā Caves. Although the Ellora caves were impressive, they were only a primer for viewing the Ajantā caves. As I navigated my way through the first cave, I immediately felt a strong emotion pervade my whole being. Why? You see, I've gone to major "Asian Art" collections at several big-name museums in the past. As impressive as they were, the collections were only paintings or sculptures here and there. The Ajantā caves are a totally immersive 1000-to-2000-year-old collection that you can walk inside of! The paintings are not restored and are in their original state without any protective glass coverings. The sculptures and carvings still had some of the enamel on them. Let us not forget the large vaulted dome ceilings supported by pillars with beautifully carved detail. This is what is all around you. Even the acoustics were beautiful. All my senses were saturated, like a sponge that could not take any more water. It was impressive to say the least.

From Aurangabād I made my way to Bijapur via a government bus. Do you remember the 15-hour hell-ride bus trip I took from Sydney to Byron Bay? Well, I've learned the hard way that hell is only relative! I ended up taking some bad advice from the hotel clerk who said that a bus would be faster than a train. Even though I was not in a rush, I heeded his advice. I later found out that there were no "luxury buses" going to my destination, so I ended up taking a government bus instead. These buses are *not* something to write home about, but I will explain them to you anyway. Imagine your old yellow school bus with seats that are half as comfortable. Paint the bus red and be sure to remove the muffler. My ears are still ringing! Now pack the bus with the same amount of fully-grown (and some overgrown) people, remembering that these seats were designed for small kids. Next, take your 20-minute or half-hour ride to school and increase it to 12 hours. This is what you call a hell ride, and I'm sure I'll experience new levels in the future too!

I scheduled two days and a night in Bijapur to break up my hell-ride bus trip. There were some monuments that were very famous, but I'll spare you the details. A more interesting note was when I was walking to a monument called Ingram de Rosa. I was with a local who spoke a word

or two of English here and there. He asked me if I liked India. I responded that it was a beautiful country. He told me to look at the torn-apart road with cow dung and litter all over it, lined with decrepit houses. Pointing to all that, he asked me why I thought this was beautiful. This was a difficult question to answer in complete English, not to mention the traveler “yes/no charades” language. I told him that India has a soul. In simple English, I told him that externally (pointing to my skin), his country was not that pretty, but internally (pointing to my heart), it was very pretty. It has a Soul/Atman. It is pretty beyond words. Yes, the beggars and pushers of tourist items are annoying and wear me down sometimes, but put that aside and they have some great people that have given me a great Aloha welcome.

I remember way back when I was in a town near Aurangabād, which was only a few days ago. I was at a “sweet store” I found off the beaten track. I wanted to buy each sweet individually (rather than by the kilo) so I could see what the Indian sweets and pastries tasted like. After the shop owner realized I was new to India, he started giving me and my friends free samples of each sweet. He even insisted that we try a few things we didn’t want to try. He invited us inside his stall, and sent out for chāi tea.

Later he read our palms and told our futures. He was good and didn't charge for the palm readings either. Reading my friend's palm, he said, "You are the brother of three." He replied by saying "No" in his thick Japanese accent. (It sounded something like "Noooooooooo...") The store owner/palm-reader looked at his palm again and said, "When you go home, ask your mother if she had an abortion or a miscarriage. Those are your missing brothers." It just so happened that my friend did know about these unfortunate incidents and then agreed, all skepticism removed. The owner refused to charge us for anything and was upset when we tried to insist on at least paying for the chāi. He was, shall we say, very sweet. :) I later got the address of his brother-in-law along with a note telling him to show me around the city of Ujjain, which he told me not to miss.

So I'm in Bijapur, and I finished seeing the two main attractions before noon. With extra time on my hands, I decided it would be interesting to go see one of the famous Indian movies. It was actually pretty cool. I would compare the movie to your everyday porn flick. You see, the plot does not matter and you can figure out what is going on even if you don't speak the language. And the women! Ay yai yai! They make one think more than twice

about becoming a monk! As in porn, these women don't really exist in everyday life. Instead of sex scenes these movies have music and dance scenes. These scenes, like those in porn movies, are very unrealistic, and the audience does not expect them to be realistic. But it is all good fun, and they are "Disney" compared to MTV music videos. Their music is "Top 40" in India, and you hear it pumping out of the "kickers" of the rickshaws throughout Bijapur. The audience is also a part of the experience too. They cheer when the stars make their first, second, and third entrances. They cheer and sing along with the songs. The theaters charge only fifteen rupees-- about 30 cents. If you go, make sure there is *not* a lot of dialog. Remember, you don't see these movies for the acting!

I'm now staying in Hampi. It's a place where you chill out for a while, recover, and think about life. Since it is off-season, people can often stay for weeks without thinking about it. I've got the "best quality" room I've had to date for only eighty rupees per night. Thāli meals (a nearly all-you-can-eat personalized buffet) can run as low as fifteen rupees. I've finally given up using toilet paper, and I eat with my fingers as the Indians do. I've come to like the Indian culture and could find myself staying here for a while. Hampi seems to be chill, people are not hounding

me to buy things, and they are not practicing their three lines of English on me (“Hello, what is your name, and what country are you from?”). Before Hampi, I’ve caught myself failing my own “hello test” a few times. This is not because I’m rude, but because of these three questions I get asked a few hundred times a day. The interchange usually ends with a right-handed handshake. You are supposed to use your left hand to clean yourself after you go “poopie” and shake hands and eat with your right. However, I’m new to this technique and find my right hand to be more comfortable for the bathroom because the bucket and dipper is usually on the right side with the water tap. Could they secretly do the same? Would they really want to know the truth about my toilet skills when they reach out their hand? Nevertheless, I make the effort to “reach out” to them.

Many travelers complain about the peddlers, beggars, thieves, and pickpockets. Yes, it is annoying, but I have come to the realization that most Americans have that same attitude of taking advantage of the rich. What? Yup! It’s present in their everyday life. You see, I’ve got this passport wallet stuffed down my pants with 4000 rupees in it (less than \$100). I paid nearly 70,000 rupees just in airfare to get here (the long way). I have modestly spent

nearly 260,000 rupees in the past ten months. The average railway vendor makes 40-150 rupee profit per day, and these are the people who are lucky enough to have a job! It seems that the dollar-to-rupee perspective is equal. In other words, I'm Bill Gates. Every traveler is Bill Gates and we all have a fifty-foot neon sign on our foreheads that says BILL GATES... BILL GATES... BILL GATES....

So how can the American public be like the peddlers, beggars, thieves, and pickpockets of India? Have you ever taken home that pen from work? How about those nifty sticky notes? If a relative, business associate, or a friend pirated a Microsoft (Bill Gates) software package, would you call the police? Or do you think this multi-million or billion-dollar corporation/person makes enough money and will not miss this small thing, whatever it is? Do you feel it's a crime one should go to jail for? Yes, it's wrong, but it doesn't have the "lynch him" type of feel to it. This is how the Indians see travelers. They will charge us more for something because we can't be bothered with the full-time job of haggling down to the "local price." We will settle for a modestly inflated rate rather than an overly inflated rate. It is a difficult position to be in. It can wear you out too. But seeing this reality puts things in the right perspective. It is a harsh reality of human nature that must

be accepted because it will probably never change. Once it is accepted, it will still be unpleasant, but better tolerated than before. Accepting this without getting upset is a lesson I am constantly learning. Without this acceptance, one would constantly be miserable in India.

I'm nearly finished with *The Lord of the Rings*. It took me a while to read it because I needed to find a replacement for the copy that burned to ashes back in Fiji. It helped me come up with the perfect analogy as I was telling someone about my goals of traveling and eventually ordaining as a monk. I am like Frodo. I am like the boy in *The Talisman*. I am like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. I am on a mission of some sort. I will have to travel very far. I will come across many distractions and unplanned sidetracks. I may even want to rest for a while instead of moving onward. No one knows, including myself, if I will make it to the end of my journey (Thailand). Will I find the Wizard, the Talisman or the depths of Mordor? I do not know. I write anxiously, not knowing, just as you read. Hopefully I will acquire a heart, a brain, courage, and some nice-looking robes too. Like Frodo's story, the end seems so far away in the beginning to take form in the end. The ending is the climax, the war, and/or the confrontation. The desired ending is almost guaranteed to come but the characters don't know it.

Those who know me well will tell you that I am quite a character!

Sometimes when I was on the island of Kauai, I felt like I could choose and write my own destiny. I was an actor in my own script. Was the writing before or after? Since at any moment in time my computer might get stolen or become totally unusable (the black spots on my computer are getting larger), here is the script I wish to write:

There was this guy who went on a trip around the world to “find himself” with the goal of ending up in Thailand and ordaining as a monk. He finally ended up in Thailand, ordained, and found the 227 rules as easy to follow as No Smoking signs for nonsmokers (that is the wish). After 5-10 years of training and attaining enlightenment, he wrote about his experiences, went back to Kauai as monk, and lived as a true forest monk in the States.

I normally wait six or so weeks before writing a travel note to you. However, India is filled with so many new experiences that I must end this one abruptly before it turns into an epic e-mail, if it is not one already.

Namaste is also a word for goodbye. Like A L O O O H A! it means more of a wish upon parting. Until recently I thought Americans were out of luck with our simple

“goodbye.” Re-evaluating the word, I found there is actually a “wish” in our parting words too. If it were not a good wish it would just be “by” or “badbye” or ‘buzz-off bye.” But we say “GOOD-bye” and “See you later.” Sometimes we lose the Aloha that is already in our own language. The next time you say goodbye, you can put your hands together in a prayer formation in front of your face. Bow your head slightly with closed eyes and say, “Goodbyes to you my friend!”

You’ll soon feel the Namaste and Aloha spirit within.

Namaste!

Goodbyes to you my friends!

I will speak with you later.

Jeremy

Travel Note 10: India II & Nepal

October 6, 2000

Namaste!

A lot has happened since I gave you the first India update. I have been through many parts of India and Nepal. I have seen the ultimate guru and also the Tāj Mahal. I have experienced the sacred city of Varanasi. I have gone trekking in the desert and in the Himālayas of Nepal. I have met many challenges as I predicted in my earlier note. I even met my ultimate match and I also reluctantly said goodbye to her. I am in Thailand now. This physical journey has seemed to end while the path of the Buddha has just started to reveal itself to me.

After Hampi, I decided to go see Sai Baba. I would guess that most readers of this travel note do not have the faintest clue who Sai Baba is. I didn't know either until I heard about him from someone a few years back and looked him up on the Internet. His picture was easy to find and he looked like a leftover basketball player from the 70's! I laughed a few times, but now that I've stayed at his ashram for a while, he doesn't seem so strange anymore. So who is Sai Baba? He is probably the most recognized guru in the world. He is the pope of India. He is the swami

of swamis. He is the Baba of Babas. I don't just say this-- I've talked with many people, and if you ask around, you will soon start to hear the magical stories of this present-day saint. He is even listed twice in the India *Lonely Planet* travel guide. When I first heard about him, I decided I would see him if I ever went to India. I would see firsthand the things about him I have heard. I've heard that getting to talk with him is just as likely as winning the Powerball lottery. Nevertheless, I decided that seeing such a man, even just for one second from a distance, would be beneficial whether I believed in him or not.

To see Sai Baba takes a lot of patience and perseverance. Besides going to India and finding his ashram, you need to wake up at 4:00 a.m. to get on the lottery queue by 4:30 a.m. This queue consists of 20 single-file lines with 50-70 people in each line. If you do the math, that is 1000-1400 people. That number only represents the men who wish to get up that early and wait for three hours. The women with the same initiative do the same thing. At 4:30 a.m. each person at the front of the row pulls a number from an orange bag. Then, each row is allowed to go enter the temple one at a time according to the assigned number. If you are in the first or second lottery line, you will be seated in the first row of the "Avatar Path." This is the red-

carpeted path Sai Baba walks along to get inside the temple. It is purposely long so everyone can get a chance to be close to him. If he happens to walk near you when you're in the front row, and wishes to see you (out of 5000-10,000 people), you will get an interview. After everyone is seated along the Avatar Path, you sit, sit, sit, sit, and sit some more until Sai Baba comes out at 7:00 a.m. So it is luck or karma that gets you in the front row, and then if he picks you... well, some people might even start to worship you!

So I'm in the hall and waiting to see "Swami." I finally got into a line that would put me in the front row. I'm observing the whole process. The music starts (which means Swami is coming) and the birds are flying in and out of this temple filled with nearly 8000 people. As Swami walks along his red-carpeted Avatar Path, he takes many detours and receives hundreds of letters from anxious followers who might even trade their firstborn for this privilege. As he approaches, I notice that he is coming closer and closer to me. Before I know it, he is right in front of me. This is such a rare event! I was supposed to ask for an interview, but nothing could come out of my mouth. In my mind I was saying, "Swami... Swami... over here... Call me for an interview!" but no words came out of

my mouth. Before I knew it, he had taken everyone's letters and was headed down "The Path." As he went, people were touching his feet and then rubbing their faces with their now golden hands. I figured that when in Rome (or in this case India) but I was too late. I caught a little bit of his robe as the security guard/volunteer gave me dirty looks, as he was supposed to. A few seconds later, we both smiled because he knew he would have done the same thing, especially since he was a devotee while I was only an observer.

Sai Baba can make things appear from nowhere. That is his specialty. This is the main reason why he has become so popular. He has even been documented as giving many miracle cures and even bringing several people back from the dead. Did someone say Lazarus? We are talking Jesus type of miracles! In any case, I wasn't ready to go drink punch with this guy. However, I do give him lots of credit. He runs a smooth camp for no possible profit. Everything is sold at cost and the donation box is very difficult to find. He inspires people to learn the Hindu Dharma, but more importantly, the Universal Dharma of Love. "Help Ever, Hurt Never" is what he would like to be remembered by. His followers love him and eagerly read as many books as they can on his restatement of this universal Dharma. He

has even written a cleverly titled book called *Don't Bypass Your Heart*. There are hundreds of books written on him or by him. The books are sold at nominal cost of 50 cents to one dollar, which is super cheap even by Indian standards.

Magician, Fraud, Avatar, or Messiah, his mission of spreading love is working. Sai Baba has created "Free Hospitals" that perform modern Western operations. He has established a highly competitive and respected free college, and another is on its way. He even has a clean water campaign for rural parts of India. There seems to be no stopping this love empire. I clap my hands as a pragmatic observer with not much faith. Sometimes I wish I had the faith his followers have. They literally worship the ground he walks on. You should see them. They are very happy people. Everyone wears white shirts and pants in the ashram. It is quite easy to tell which are the true followers of his path. They have a certain glow to them. It was an experience to go see Sai Baba, and during this experience I finally made up my mind about when I would end up in Thailand.

I am a Libra. As you may know, Libras have a very hard time making decisions. In the past I used a little trick to

help make decisions, flipping a coin and calling heads or tails. Although it sounds like the familiar trick, I do it a little differently. I flip the coin and if I do not like the results, then I choose the opposite, the one I liked. This method lets me get in touch with my heart and what I feel I really want to do. Recently, I had made a similar test for whether to go straight to Thailand. Rather than flipping a coin, I used my “flippies” (flip-flop thong sandals). It was appropriate because I was using my shoes to decide which path I would take!

On my first day at the Sai Baba ashram, a Westerner told me to get a different (cheaper) pair of shoes before my Tevas got stolen outside the temple. Not everyone who comes to the ashram follows the Universal Rule (love and respect others). Luckily, I heeded his advice, for within 24 hours my 50-cent “flippies” were stolen during breakfast. One of my friendly roommates jokingly told me that someone outside the ashram was probably wearing my shoes. I responded that I really pitied the person who has to walk a mile in my shoes!

A few days later I told myself I would go straight to Thailand the next time my shoes got stolen. I became fearless concerning my shoes. I left them neatly together

near the entrance of everywhere I went. “Go ahead and take ‘em,” I would say to myself. When I would come back and find them still there, I sensed some disappointment. Later, I realized what was in my heart. With this in mind, I made up my mind to rush through India and Nepal and then fly directly to Thailand before my 30th birthday. For the first time in 11 Months (has it been that long?) I have an itinerary! I’m now a tourist rather than a traveler. I recently gave my compass as a gift to my camel driver. I no longer needed my compass at this stage since I finally had a clear direction in my life.

If you look at a *Lonely Planet* guide to India, you will see a map of India with captions marking the highlights. Along with the caves of Aurangabād, the Taj Mahal, and the Ganges in Varanasi, taking a camel safari in the Rājasthan Desert is listed. This is one adventure not offered (yet) in New Zealand!

As soon as I heard someone talk about the camel safari, I put it on my “Before I die... or ordain” list. I figure that these newsletters have increased your list too. So without further ado, I will explain what it is like to ride off into the sunset on a camel. Even though I had fun, it was, shall we say a pain-in-the-ass thing to do! My bum (as the British

call rumps) was not used to the camel saddle, but it was worth every ounce or “pounding” of fun.

The first day was quick and we started on the camels at 4:30 p.m. We rode for a couple of hours and then watched the sun set on the sand dunes while our camel leader cooked us up a great Indian meal. The next day, I had a different camel driver named Isaac (pronounced EE-sock). He was a true Indian cowboy! That sounds oxymoronic, doesn't it? Indian cowboy. His full-time job is to herd his sheep, goats, and cows in search of food scattered on the sand dunes. If there were one thing that was really special about the camel trip, it was the biblical nature of it all. I haven't really read any of the Bible, but I've seen *History of the World Part II*, *The Prince of Egypt*, *The Holy Grail*, and *The Life of Brian*, and that is more or less all the Bible education I have.

So I'm riding on the desert with this single “cam” vehicle when I hear these bells. Tons of bells. They are on the sheep and goats as the shepherd walks about in the desert armed with his stick. Several of these shepherds mysteriously appear throughout the day. They seem as if they come out of nowhere. On the last night I had a choice of sleeping on the dunes or at my camel driver's house. I

thought it would be nice to visit his house, and I didn't want another kilo of sand in my mouth by the morning.

The camel driver's house was not what I expected. It consisted of one raised bed (which he offered to me) and a fire pit on top of a sand ridge with no enclosures. In or "on" his house lived 300 sheep, 100 goats, and a few cows. It was really a surreal scene to be in. It was hardly comfortable, but it was much more of an experience than sleeping in the dunes for a second night. An interesting thing was the little sheep pellets all over their "house" floor (or sand dune). Sitting and eating takes place there too. They also used the same sand, along with the pellets, to wash the pots, pans, and plates before serving the food to me. As they offered my dinner and breakfast I told myself, "They don't get sick and neither will I!"

Another weird thing was this Ozzy (Australian) living in the next valley. Her mission was to plant trees in the desert. She didn't get much cooperation from the locals until she said that she was sent there by God to plant trees. At first, she just said it so that the Muslims would help her. Now she believes this is why she was put on earth. She has planted a few hundred trees. Her daily task is to carry water to them throughout the day. This was surreal to

experience as well. I told her that she reminded me of the book *The Little Prince*.” She had never heard of that children’s/adult book before. Strange? Before I knew it, the camel trip was over and I was in the city of Jaisalmer.

Jaisalmer was definitely exciting. Imagine a city from *Aladdin*, or *The Prince of Egypt* or *One Thousand and One Nights*. This is that city. There is a main fort on top of a mountain. Inside the castle-like walls lies a fully functioning city. It was exciting and what I thought more of India would be like, but it’s not. I tried my hand at buying a carpet. I think I got ripped off, but it is still a good deal, I think. The funny thing about buying an expensive carpet in India is that neither of us trusted each other. They were afraid the money wouldn’t come through and I was afraid the carpet would never get sent to my parents. I think the drug deals seen in the movies might be a little smoother than this carpet-buying extravaganza! Nevertheless, my parents did receive a beautiful carpet a few weeks later.

I didn’t get sick during my stay in India and Nepal and I ate and drank almost everything. Why be afraid? The only people I knew who got sick were the people who followed the sanitary precautions. Why bother being afraid if it

won't do you any good? Likewise, I got sick *before* going to India. I actually think my eating habits helped me not get sick. If anything, stress, worry, and fear will make you sicker than anything imagined. It reminded me of a Jerry Garcia show (concert) I went to in Hartford, Connecticut. I paid to park my car in a parking lot so I would not have to worry about parking tickets, etc. It turned out that the parking lot owners towed my car because I didn't return until two hours after the show was over. That is what you do at a Jerry or Dead Show and I was not the only one whose car was towed away. The next day (there were two nights of him playing), I said, "Screw it!" and I fearlessly parked in a clearly marked yellow-striped tow-away zone on the street. My car was still there a few hours after the show ended.

I've got to tell you about the laundry in India. For about 3-8 rupees they will wash any piece of clothing. They wash the clothing in these really dirty rivers and beat the hell out of them over rocks. I'm not too sure about the technique, but they do an amazing job at cleaning my clothes. They can get just about anything out. Even my grandmother would be impressed at their work! I had one shirt that I couldn't part with (until a week ago) that had gotten moldy while I was camping during a marathon rain

in Kauai. Since the mold was on the bottom of the sleeve and it was one of my favorite shirts, I decided to pass it off as a clean shirt. (Read in a discreet low voice: Backpackers are allowed to do this.) I've washed this thing four or five times (Ick!! in 11 months??) and it never came out. Somehow the ghat washers of India were able to do some magic on this shirt. The only problem with this great washing technique is that one assumes other countries will do the same great job. No way. The launderers of Nepal looked at me strangely when I told them their lousy job would be "NO PROBLEM" in India.

Everyone will ask me so I will answer... yes, I saw the Taj, but that was only so I wouldn't wonder how great it was. Trust me... it is cool but there are better things to see in India. I saw it because I had to. In Paris, I felt obligated to go see the Mona Lisa even though my sister told me how unimpressive it was. Regardless, I had to see for myself how unimpressive the real Mona Lisa really was. The Taj Mahal was beautiful but I felt that it is played up a little too much.

After Agra (where the Taj is), I went to Varanasi. Getting to Varanasi was a piece of cake, but the rickshaw ride from the train station was quite an adventure and a trap as

well!!! The travel book warns you about the cleverness of the rickshaw drivers but I never really expected how clever they can be!! I met some people on the train and we decided to share a rickshaw ride so we could save twenty cents (India makes you think like this all the time). They wanted to go to the Surashiv hotel, but the driver brought them to the Surasai and insisted that the hotel recently changed its name. Why would a hotel that is recommended by a travel book change its name??? Nevertheless, the travelers decided to stay there. Duh?

This type of scam was predicted in the travel book. This is how it works. Indians give a place a name similar to the one recommended in the travel book, and then try to get business by giving a 50- to 100-rupee commission to the rickshaw drivers for insisting that the counterfeit place is real. That is why they will lie to your face and get upset when you accuse them of lying... when they are in fact lying. It's all about money. Rickshaw drivers make OJ seem like Honest Abe. You know they are lying, yet they are so persistent that somehow you still fall into their trap. It is a really terrible feeling to call someone a liar, later think that he might be telling you the truth, and then discover he was lying all along.

After these Swedish tourists disregarded “truth in business” ethics and went to the place he recommended, I tried a different strategy. Rather than tell the driver where I wanted to stay, I told him I wanted to go to the Rana Ghat, which is near the Shiva Rest House, where I planned to stay. The driver told me that Rana Ghat was flooded and I’d need to stay somewhere else. He seemingly brought me to the ghat next to it and I reluctantly paid him. I walked over to where I thought the Rana Ghat would be and soon enough, I saw a closed-down Shiva Rest House. But something didn’t seem right. Immediately someone appeared who told me he was the hotel owner, and all the hotels by the Ganges were shut down. He also conveniently had another temporary place I could stay at. Hmm... I’ve heard this one before and asked another person where a restaurant was that I knew was nearby. It turned out that I was over one kilometer from the restaurant that should have been around the corner! I’d been duped! The sign on the ghat was purposely mislabeled to make tourists walk in the wrong direction only to find the fake guest house chained up! It was a good thing that I looked for the restaurant!

By the time I made it to the real Shiva Rest House, someone had taken the last bed. Fortunately, I went to an

empty hotel that used to food poison its customers in a nifty insurance scam. This place was listed in *Lonely Planet* as “not recommended” so I got a prime circular dome ceiling room that stood right over the Ganges. It was the most fantastic room I ever stayed in. And for a really good price. I just had to remember not to eat their food! After settling down and talking with a few other travelers, I learned we had all been brought to the fake hotel.

One of the amazing things about India is how chaos can fall into form. There are almost no traffic signals, yet everyone seems to get to where they want to go. I almost took a picture of a traffic light since they are so rare! I never wait to cross the street, either. I just cross and everything works itself out. The electricity goes out a few times a day, but usually works when you need it. One night in Varanasi the power went out during a dinner with some friends at a restaurant. We were overlooking the main road and noticed a few sparks flying off the telephone pole. It appeared that a person was trying to set one of the wires straight in a rat’s nest of wires. I would guess that one of the wires must have come undone or was shorting out another essential wire. It seemed crazy and stupid for a person to actually attempt to fix this WITH A

BROOMSTICK! However, when the lights went back on we realized he was probably from the electrical company!

After Varanasi, I went to Bodhgaya and then to Kathmandu. Nepal is a literally a breath of fresh air compared to India. In Nepal, people don't say "Namaste" in order to get your attention for a quick sale. They genuinely mean it. It is a great feeling to be trekking in the Himālayan Mountains and have hundreds of people empty their hands so they can put their palms together just to say hello (Namaste).

I remember sitting in a rooftop restaurant in Kathmandu. It was a little bit colder than normal, but we could all easily bear it. After a while, I told my companions we should move inside where it was warmer and properly enjoy our dinner. After we moved we were a lot more comfortable, and could feel that slight tension inside of us get released. That is how one feels when one comes to Nepal from India. But there are certain things that I surely will miss. I think most people have a love-hate relationship with India. With me, love overpowers the hate.

Getting to Nepal was a little troublesome. The first thing I must tell you about Nepal is that you need \$30 of genuine hard U.S. currency in order to buy a visa at the Nepal gate.

Since I don't use traveler's checks and I rely on bank machines and credit card advances, I didn't have any USD with me. I did have more than US\$30 worth of Indian currency, but that was useless. The airport moneychangers would only change Indian currency into Nepalese currency, and they wouldn't sell dollars either. I found it very strange that the Nepal Immigration Office at the airport would not accept Nepalese currency... ahem... their own currency.

So what does one do? I asked the Immigration officer that very question. The Immigration office confiscated my passport and gave me a one-day temporary visa in its place. I then took a cab into Kathmandu, stayed at the cabby's recommended place, and bought some black-market U.S. currency at an extremely high rate that night. The next morning I needed to hire a kamikaze taxi driver (the same one) to drive me back to the airport because there was a one-day transportation strike. Just my luck! We had to go at 5:00 a.m. to avoid rocks being thrown through the car windows. I finally made it to the airport and met the same Immigration officer who issued me the temporary visa the night before. I gave him my US\$30, and he asked how I was able to get to the airport during the strike. He was very surprised to see me. I told him about

my ride over and said it would have been nice if he told me about the strike the night before! I then said, as he was drinking his complimentary cup of chāi, that some chāi would be the least he could do for my troubles. He obliged, and we chatted for a while about the differences between India and Nepal. Since I was at the airport, I decided that it would make sense to fly to the Himālayas to trek in Nepal and possibly meet my friends from Varanasi. If there was one thing that Nepal is noted for, it is Himālayan treks.

I flew into Pokhara that same day. When I arrived, I was still at the mercy of the transportation strike and ended up riding a bicycle with my full backpack to a “gotcha” hotel. Anyone who has been to a third-world country without a guidebook will know what these are. They are hotels that book rooms only because they use taxi or other kinds of drivers to bring people in from the airport, bus, or train stations. But what can one do during a strike? Even this person was affected, as I ended up riding the bike he rode because he could not use his car. He showed me his hotel, which was not far from where my friends were staying, and it was a nice room at the market price. I ended up staying there mainly because he had showed me the way to the center of town from the airport and had actually worked for his commission this time.

Nepal is a lot different from India. I expected it to be similar until a fellow traveler who had been several times told me it would be such a relief compared to India. She was right. Even though I could not take off my BILL GATES sign, I could still feel like I was not being constantly eyed as fair game to be ripped off.

The countryside is what the country is all about. One needs only travel a little beyond Kathmandu to realize its beauty. Nepal lies in a class of its own. It has a natural beauty that comes close to the luminosity of Kauai. The people don't seem to be in a rush for anything, and they seem to never fail to appreciate the natural beauty that surrounds them. They also seem to smile more than most, and they look forward to welcoming new people to their land. I have realized that people from nice surroundings appear happier than people from not-so-nice lands. The happy bunch would include Kauai, Nepal, and Fiji. I've come to formulate a theory that people are reflections of their environment.

All countries have different attractions and as I've said, trekking in the Himālayan Mountains is the one thing Nepal is most noted for. Without further ado, I flew into Jomson Village and walked back to Pokhara. This small

seven-day trek is part of the Annapūrṇa trek. It has been nicknamed the “Apple Pie Trek” since just about every guest house serves apple pie. One does not need a heavy pack with camping gear to go trekking in Nepal. Just walk as far as you want and then check into a small guest house in the nearest mountain village. Even though this trek was called the “Apple Pie Trail,” I ended up calling it the “Cake Walk” since I hired someone to carry my light pack the whole way. I didn’t need to hire someone, but why not? It costs only four or five U.S. dollars per day and the local people need the money. I also didn’t have any real hiking shoes and didn’t want to run into any problems. This way I was able to trek the entire trail with my Tevas (the same pair used in the lava hike).

The peak experience of the Himālayan Trek was at Poon Hill. My fearless porter and I hiked to Ghorepānī early in the day. Everyone stops at this small Himālayan village to see Poon Hill, but to see it one needs to spend the night at the bottom and get up at 4:00 in the morning. You have to be at the top of Poon Hill before 5:15 a.m. when the mountains are crystal clear to see the sun start to rise. So nearly everyone wakes up to catch the sunrise. The next morning we started our way up the mountain.

Although we were seemingly hopelessly trying to make it up this very big mountain in total darkness, somehow we achieved our goal. By the time we made it to the top, the morning light started to reveal itself. Watching the sunrise was like watching a Polaroid picture develop before your eyes. The stars faded into the morning sky and the mountains began to convert from gray to snow-capped Himālayan Mountains over the blue sky. Once this happened, I was able to see nearly fifteen mountain peaks all at once. It took about five side-by-side pictures to reveal this panoramic feast. Now this is what I call a peak experience!

The last part of my trip was spent in Kathmandu. Kathmandu is a very touristy city and one can be hard pressed to find any Nepalese food! Most of the places had Western music pumping out of their cafes. Nearing my last day, I found refuge in a Western hippie area called Freak Street. This was probably named after the “long-haired hippie freaks” who flocked here in the 1960’s and 70’s. If I had more time, I would hang out there for a few weeks to a month and perhaps grow my hair, letting it hang out too.

I stayed at this run-down hotel with paintings and clever “free your mind” sayings painted on the room walls. I

think the place hasn't changed in thirty years. That would include the sheets, mattresses, and toilet water! However, I think the mouse who lived inside the wall was a new addition. The café downstairs made me feel like I could stay there for ages. I could finally see how those Mafia guys could hang out at a café for days on end. Unfortunately, or fortunately, I had a date with a Thai monastery before I turned 30. It was very sad to leave.

In the last letter, I wrote about how I am like Frodo, the boy in "The Talisman," or Dorothy from "The Wizard of Oz." I said that as in every book, there would be a conflict, a climax, or confrontation that would challenge the main character. However, the desired outcome or goal would be met. I also said that the characters would not know this would happen to them. I found it quite humorous that I had correctly predicted that this would happen to me in my real life story! When I said this, I was only trying to be theatrical and was not really serious! I really thought I was on the easy home stretch to Thailand and didn't consider a conflict arising in such a short time. I was leaving for Nepal in a few days, enjoying Varanasi, and would be flying to Bangkok in time for my birthday. But I was so stupid! I didn't think it would happen to me, but it did. I had no concept of what would challenge me to the brink.

Think about it! What would challenge a person who is set on becoming a monk in Thailand? It was a woman and a very special one at that.

We met by chance in Varanasi before I left for Nepal. I wanted to go up the Ganges on a riverboat during sunrise. I had arranged for a driver the night before, but he overslept (maybe he got food poisoning from the hotel owner). With the sun approaching and no driver to be found, I hailed the first boat with tourists that I saw. “Hello... Namaste! Can I ride in your boat?” It was a pretty bold thing to say to complete strangers, but it is my style. After seeing me, they drifted with the current a few more seconds, and then told their driver to pick me up. On the boat were two German men and a German woman, Nadja. Afterwards, I took my heroes out for some chāi and we all hit it off. It turned out they were headed for Nepal for a few weeks and so was I. Go figure? We decided to hang out together and possibly hook up for a Himālayan trek in Nepal. A peculiar energy arose between Nadja and me during a rickshaw ride to Sāranath (where the Buddha’s first teaching was), but I ignored the vibe.

After my nightmare entry into Nepal, I finally hooked up with my German friends, and I was set up to do a trek with

two of them (Nadja and Stephan) the next day. During the middle of the first day of the trek, I realized the possible danger of falling in love and made an excuse to go on my own in a different direction. This would save a day on the way back and would put me one day ahead of the German expedition team. I didn't want the politics of breaking up a good long-term friendship between Nadja and Stephan. I also didn't want to start a connection that needed to be broken later on. However, fate would not keep us away from each other.

On day four or five of the trek, Nadja and Stephan did some hard hiking and pushed their trek a day ahead of schedule. That night they walked into the same hotel I was staying at (there were ten possible choices). There was not much more that I could avoid at that point in time. To make a long story short, Nadja and I hopelessly fell in love even though we both knew I would have to leave. The question was whether or not I would make it to Thailand. I did delay my ticket for one day, but I am now in Thailand, which signals the ending of this sad story.

We decided that it had to be like this. I needed to become a monk, and if I stayed with her I would end up leaving her for the monastery in the future. This is not the first time

this has happened to me. The monk qualities inside me may have been what she fell in love with. Sadly, it could not have been another way. Becoming a monk has been my dream for a very long time now. I must do it. I must make the final departure. For her, to love me was to let me go.

This short-lasting relationship has been the biggest challenge for me. I should have seen it coming, but I didn't think it would actually happen to me. To meet as we did was totally fate. It was something out of a book or a love story. When she asked how it was possible for us to meet by chance on that riverboat day, I responded, "The gods did it to test me." She was sent by the devil and by the heavens above. The devil, or Mara, as we Buddhists call it, is a representation of desire and temptation. The heavens or gods are a representation of beauty and love. In a nutshell, that was my experience with this very special woman. If it were allowed, I might have considered taking her to the monastery with me! However, we both knew that could not happen. We appreciated our time together, ignoring the approaching departure date, and realized that it wouldn't last if I went to the monastery. If my life were a movie (sometimes it seems like that), staying with her might be a nice surprise happy ending. Maybe that was

what I was really searching for? Unfortunately, the scriptwriters created many tears with this ending.

Many people have asked why I want to ordain and become a monk. Is it really worth it? I usually respond by telling these inquisitive people that I have nothing better to do. I really don't. I've been very fortunate. I had many experiences in my teenage years. That didn't do it. I've met one and now two soulmates, but I don't believe that will do it either. I also do not desire kids and fear they would end up like myself! I have made enough money in the computer field and have wisely invested to allow myself to perpetually travel around the world. But traveling didn't do it for me either. I wish for true happiness. The Unchanging, the Unconditioned, the Deathless. That is what will do it for me. I don't know what led me to this knowledge of the dissatisfaction of life. Maybe it was cosmic, life-changing experience I had back in the 60's (actually 1987 but it sounds better to say the 60'). I hope to find the answer, and hey... maybe I can write about it too! Aspro people have told me, I have this unique ability to draw people into my world. Here is the real big wish: May I become a successful monk and be able to draw everyone into my world!

Well, I'm sending you what I think might be my final travel note. I am at the monastery, the first I feel comfortable at. As in Nepal, Kauai, Hampi, and Varanasi, I think I will stay here for a while and hopefully ordain. I have stated my intentions and it seems the monks share my enthusiasm to ordain. I have enjoyed writing these letters to you and myself, and hope to send a final one when I fully ordain.

Namaste! May you all share in the blessings springing from the good I have done.

Jeremy

Part II: The Buddhist Path

Monastery Note 1: Wat Pa Nanachat

October 30, 2000

Sawatdee! (Hello in Thai)

If there is one thing that the Jewish religion tried to beat into my head it was, “The Germans were the last to really hurt us and we should never forget it.” I never really bought this idea, and at age seven or so being forced to watch old Nazi film clips of dead bodies being stacked on carts was not my idea of a fun religion to be a part of. I rejected my religion as soon as I was allowed to do so. That meant after giving my parents the Bar Mitzvah, or more importantly, the party. After that, I almost never set foot in a Jewish temple again. Just about any Jew would laugh at that. It’s funny because it is true and very common. Eventually, while taking a World Religions course in college, I found that Buddhism was the best fit with what I already believed. At that time I was a meditator, a vegetarian who believed in peace, and I did not drink or do drugs. Of course, there is much more to Buddhism than that, but in my youth I grew up without any spirituality (being in touch with one’s spirit) and anything remotely spiritual would have caught my attention when I was ripe

and ready. Buddhism was the first thing I came into contact with that did it for me.

Now that I am seriously thinking about religion again, I think about those Germans once more. They haunt me to no end. But the crime done to me by Germany was not one of hate and violence, but love and affection. They were the last to do it to me as well. I will remember my special German friend and she will haunt me for a long time. This will be my final battle with love. I once told a friend that if one can renounce the girl of his dreams then he will be OK with the celibacy thing. I guess I'm lucky that I had a chance to renounce her. But she has not totally left my mind.

There are many things to give up when you go into a monastery with the intention of becoming a monastic. Communication with the outside world is kept at a minimum, and the people who stay here are encouraged to “stay here” – that is, not leave unless they need certain so-called requisites from the town. There are different levels of people who stay here. There are lay Thai visitors, short-term residents, long-term residents, *anagāriya* or *pakau* residents, and of course the novice and regular monks, or bhikkhus as we call them. When visitors first

come they are put on the short-term resident list. Short-term visitors don't have to shave their heads and eyebrows (my head was already shaved in Nepal). After the fourth day, I was moved to the long-term list. I shaved my head again and shaved my eyebrows for the first time. It was a really weird feeling to shave my eyebrows. The Pink Floyd movie *The Wall* came to mind after I did this. Now having the proper external appearance, I was then given a ku□ to abide in.

I'm assuming most people do not know what a ku□ i is. Imagine a tree house without the tree and a trap door to get inside. Add a nice covered veranda, a more easily accessible way to get up (like a staircase) and you have a ku□ i. The living area of a ku□ i is a one-room house raised about two and a half meters on stilts. The room is approximately 2.5 meters by 2.5 meters. That is all the space one needs. There are no beds in these ku□ is either. Sleeping is done on the hardwood floor. One may decide to put a thin blanket underneath for cushioning and insulation, but that is about as soft as it will get. The covered veranda outside is very convenient for meditation or just reading in the shade. It is very peaceful to live in a ku□. Perhaps that is because it has virtually nothing inside it. This emptiness can make the small intimate

room seem very spacious. A change of clothes, a grass mat, a blanket or two, and some books and candles are all one needs. It is a very simple life and seems like second nature for me in Thailand.... Unfortunately, you cannot spend all your time in the ku□ i. There are chores and meetings one must attend as a layperson, and there are even more meetings as a monastic.

When I first went to the monasteries in California and West Virginia (Travel Note 1), I was a little surprised at how little the monks practiced. There were lots of chanting, meetings, and chores for monks and lay people to do. This shattered my original perception of the romantic life of a monk. That romantic picture was to sit in a ku□ i and meditate all day long. If I wanted to do this I could always go to Burma. However, I think that the training at this monastery is superior. One does not learn to isolate oneself at this monastery. Instead, one learns to deal with everyday real-life situations on a monastic level. I can then always go to Burma once I get this “real-life” monastic foundation.

When one looks at any type of school one wishes to commit to, whether a monastery, university, or with a spiritual teacher, one must look at their students. The

teachers might be great scholars or practitioners and seem like they can teach very well, but one should always ask this question: Do I want to be like the senior students? I look at the senior monks and the people ahead of me along the path. They are impressive, and yes, they are what I aspire to become like. One can also see the progression from anagāriya to novice, from novice to monk, and from monk to senior monk. If I already had the qualities of a senior monk, then there would be no need to ordain.

When I first came to the monastery, I smashed my toe on a root protruding from the ground. I tore off the toenail and it was not a pretty sight. I had to keep it dry for two weeks, preventing me from doing several required chores. I apologized to the abbot for my lack of mindfulness, which was the cause of the accident. The abbot replied, “If you were already mindful, then you wouldn’t need to become a monk.”

Some people say that going to a monastery is an escape. Sometimes I feel like escaping from the monastery and going back to worldly life. It is very difficult to become a monk and more difficult to continue as one. It is much more difficult than I imagined, and my biggest fear is

disrobing once I become a monk. It is similar to marriage. While the divorce rate is around sixty percent, the disrobing rate for monks is closer to eighty or ninety percent. Supposedly, this monastery keeps about 25% of its monks and that is considered a good retention rate! But when you get married, you cannot think of divorce. No one would get married if they thought divorce would happen. But everyone knows divorce is statistically proven to be the most likely outcome. The couple must truly believe in their hearts that they will beat the statistics. If they don't, there is hardly any chance of success.

The marriage process at this monastery is very slow. It takes one and a half years to two years to become a fully ordained monk. They want you to be sure before you “fully go forth.” However, “sure” is relative considering a 25% retention rate after the two-year process to become a fully ordained monk. This process has several stages in this tradition. First, one needs to be an ordained anagāriya for three months. After the three months, one can decide to become a novice. Usually one will make a commitment to be a novice for a period of one year before disrobing or moving on to full ordination. If one wishes to become a fully ordained monk, one is usually asked to make a five-year commitment. The length of time is very similar to

college or university, and this place is considered Ivy League famous.

Wat Pa Nanachat (<http://www.watpahnachat.org/>) is a world-renowned monastery in Thailand and has several well-respected teachers who made a name for themselves, after the original teacher, Ajahn Chah, passed away in the early 90's. The new and old students are impressive to say the least. The students who come out of this school are well-mannered and well-rounded people. Most importantly, they seem to contain the Buddhist spirit within themselves. The spirit is so strong that it shines outside of them. It is like a flashlight (torch) or candle burning inside a tent at night. Although you cannot see inside, you can vividly see that there is a light shining in the tent. It is hard to describe. There do not seem to be monks like these anywhere else in the world.

Theravada Buddhism is not the Buddhism most people think of when they hear the word "Buddhism." In fact, most of you had probably never heard of Theravada Buddhism before reading this travel note. The majority of people would not associate Buddhism with Burma, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, or Thailand even though these countries have established Theravada Buddhism as their

national religion. Rather, most think of Tibet, despite the fact that that country has officially lost its religious identity. This association between Tibet and Buddhism is the result of the strong national campaign the Tibetans launched to create awareness of the religious oppression the Chinese government has imposed on their country. It has been a good marketing program, and the very fact that you think of Tibet when you think of Buddhism shows the campaign is working. The majority of Tibetan teachers (with the exception of one in NYC) do not have any problems touching money or charging for Dharma. Charging for Dharma gives them resources to advertise, build centers, and sell books. This campaign has also made people aware of the basic Buddhist teaching they otherwise would never have been exposed to. If such Buddhist consumers are not taken advantage of, and do become better people, then I cannot have a strong argument against all of this.

There are not many commercially available books published by Theravada monks. Lay people and Tibetan or Zen monks write most of the books seen in stores. Despite this, more books are seemingly published on Theravada Buddhism than any other kind of Buddhism. But where are these books? They are usually published for free

distribution. The only catch is that you have to be in the Buddhist circles to know where to obtain them! That is one of the problems currently being addressed at this monastery. The Internet is starting to level the playing field.

Having the Dhamma easily accessible to all people has been a long heartfelt tradition of Theravada. I have not heard of a Theravada Buddhist monastery charging their guests for food, lodging, and especially the teachings. S. N. Goenka has followed this tradition as well. Monasteries survive on freely given donations without hard-sell fundraising efforts. It seems almost impossible that they can survive, let alone grow, on this financial philosophy, but they do. However, they are less known and information about them is usually spread by word of mouth rather than advertisements.

Theravada monks get one set of robes and an alms-food bowl. These are their basic requisites, in addition to a toothbrush and a few other things. Next to the robes, the alms-food bowl is the most important requisite. Have you ever seen a beggar on the street and said to yourself, “Gee, I really would love to give this person food instead of money?” What if you saw a person on the street who said,

“I wish to work on myself. I wish to make myself a better person and get rid of my desires. I will only eat one meal a day so that I will not have too many desires for food. This will enable me to spend more time with study and practice. I also want you to watch me to make sure I act and practice as I say I will.” Would you line up to give this person food? That is how it is in Thailand. A branch monastery has brought this food tradition to England and I haven’t heard about the monks going hungry. Despite its success in England, I haven’t heard of its being practiced anywhere in America on a consistent basis at Theravada monasteries. This will hopefully change in the future.

Some people might ask what it is like to live in a Theravada monastery. I don’t know if I explained this to you in the first travel note. It is like a combination of Buddhist classes, meditation retreats, and hard labor too. There are always things that need to be done. There are also things that monks cannot do that lay people must do for them. One of the biggest things the monks depend on lay people for is food.

There is a real sense of community at this monastery, and the lay people and the monks depend on each other for existence. The lay people wish to do good by providing

food and requisites to those who are worthy. Likewise, the monks need the food. If the monks are not behaving or practicing well, then they are no longer worthy of respect. If they are not worthy of respect, then they certainly will not get any food in their bowls! It is a checks and balance system that the Buddha put into action. That is why Theravada monks are not allowed to store food.

The monks are also not allowed to accept food that has not been formally offered to them. In other words, they don't cook their own meals and they rely on the community for food. Since they are not allowed to eat after 12:00 p.m., they must receive their food in the morning. This is one of the main differences between Theravada and other traditions. Having to rely on lay people for food is a major hassle. Other traditions eventually did away with this rule for convenience or because of social norms.

There are other rules that have been abandoned, such as NOT touching money. The Theravada tradition, and more specifically the Forest traditions, have kept the Buddhist rules alive. Although the rules seem strict and burdensome, they have also helped keep the original spirit of Buddhism alive...

So where was I? What it is like to be at a Theravada monastery. The schedule at Wat Pa Nanachat is as follows:

3:00 a.m. Wake-up bell

3:30 to 5:15 a.m. Chanting and meditation in the outdoor meditation hall (sāla)

5:20 to 6:00 a.m. Sāla clean-up for the monks

6:00 to 7:00 a.m. Sweeping or helping the monks gather their morning meal

7:00 to 7:45 a.m. Free time

8:00 to 9:30 a.m. Meal offering and eating

9:30 to 10:30 a.m. Chores

10:45 to 4:30 p.m. Free time for practice and study and extra sleep

4:30 to 5:30 p.m. Teatime

5:30 to 7:00 p.m. Free time and prepare for chanting

7:00 to 9:00 p.m. Chanting and meditation

9:15 p.m. Bedtime

The schedule is a difficult one. The lack of meals – in particular, having only one meal – may catch your attention. The lack of food is hardly a nutrition problem, though. In fact, I think I have gained some weight and I'm

now on a diet! Imagine eating only one meal a day. With this “one meal a day” plan, you get a buffet nearly twelve meters long, and the dessert section consumes nearly three or four of these meters. It doesn’t sound that bad yet, does it? The problem lies with the bowl size one uses. The bowl is more or less a large mixing bowl you might use to bake a cake. It is probably big enough to hold the batter for two full-size cakes.

“So what is the problem?” my grandmother might say. The problem is that the eyes are bigger than the stomach. I’ve gorged at buffets before, but I always had the size limitation of the plate to keep me somewhat in line. After the second plate, you know you should be careful on the third. These bowls have enough room for your desires to fully display themselves, especially when you get only one trip to the endless buffet table. I’m hardly ever famished by the time the morning meal comes around, yet I try a spoonful of this and a spoonful of that from the array of dishes that have “Eat me!” written all over them. Before I know it, I’m faced with the three-or-four-meter dessert section. I cannot tell you how many times I have told myself, “This time I will not fill my bowl like I did yesterday!” but I’m always surprised at how my bowl is magically filled when I sit down for my meal.

It has taken nearly three weeks for me to get this “bowl thing” under control. “Under control” means that I don’t feel sick or have a full belly the next morning. Even though it is “under control,” I still find myself taking more food than I would like or need to eat. It tells you a lot about your desires you may not know. Eating only one meal a day can show how miserable one can be if one attempts to fulfill desires without limitation. Problems do not go away when one lives in a monastery. In fact, they get amplified on a totally different level.

Next to the food, sleep is the big problem. Actually, they are related. If you eat a heavy meal you will feel very sleepy! Now that my food problems seem to be under control I am less sleepy. But this is all relative. I’m still tired throughout the day. I usually need to get some sleep after I clean my ku□ i before I can properly meditate. I find that a thirty-minute catnap can do the trick. It can be very easy to indulge in sleep when one has to wake up so early. The amount of food and sleep one needs is very personal. Everyone requires a set range of these requisites to function well throughout the day. This range varies from person to person. Four hours a night of sleep may be perfectly fine for one person, while another might require six to seven hours. This monastery lets you be your own

enemy. You can eat or sleep as much as you want. Normally, people will overindulge in the beginning. However, if you overindulge for an extended time, you will not last long. Again, this is like any type of school. The better schools will have a structure in place for learning, which will allow enough room for students to learn for themselves, or... drop out.

When I first came to this monastery, I was told to get a torch as soon as possible. The higher the power the better. The monk in charge of the guests told me it is important not to step on the ants. There are two reasons. The first reason is obvious: not to kill or harm them. But these ants are not your everyday picnic ants. This relates to the second reason. If you get near them (and you will) they will ruthlessly attack you. They seem to have a little bit of poison in them, and their bites will sting for five to ten minutes. There are also several types of poisonous snakes slithering around the forest paths. I finally saw my first snake and hope it will be my last. As a little kid, I was plagued with nightmares of poisonous snakes. Even sometimes as an adult I wake up from such dreams. I hope they are not premonitions! In any case, I will be sending a note home for some better quality torches.

Monks in this tradition (Thai Forest) will not harm any creatures for any reason at all. They cannot ask the lay people to do the dirty work for them either. It is like hiring an assassin to kill someone. The crime is the same, if not worse. Monks cannot even wash their feet with water that might have mosquito larvae because it will kill the larvae. So what does the monastery do when ants, snakes or rats invade a kuti? The kuti gets abandoned and another one is built. It was quite humorous to see the monastery's map of the kuti is. The map had a name on each kuti except for one that was labeled "ANTS." I don't care what people say about lions. The ants are the kings of this jungle!

There is not much to say about Thailand. I have only been to the local town a few times to buy some necessities and send some e-mails. I have not really seen Thailand except for this monastery. I've heard Thailand has some really nice beaches that are similar to Fiji's, but I've been there and done that already IN FIJI. It is time to try something new.

Remember, I traveled the world to get it out of my system. Very few places seem interesting to me now. I can tell you that Thailand is a total breeze compared to India and

Nepal. Sometimes I fool myself and call this a first-world country. Realistically, I would guess that it is a second-world country by most standards of living. Anything will seem modern after India and parts of Nepal! And hey, I live in a tree house and read by candlelight!

I am now an anagāriya. This means I have taken the first step towards monasticism. It also means that I wear a white skirt or white anagāriya robes, as they call them. I have formally taken the eight precepts:

1. Not to harm any living being.
2. Not to take what is not given.
3. Not to engage in any type of sexual activity.
4. Not to speak in false, exaggerated, or harsh words.
5. Not to take any intoxicating substance (chocolate and caffeine in moderation are OK).
6. Not to eat after 12:00 noon (one meal a day while at this monastery).
7. Not to wear perfumes or jewelry (“body decorations”), and not to take part in any sensory entertainment like singing, playing instruments, or seeing plays or movies.
8. Not to sleep on a high or luxurious beds.

Basically, I am following the same rules as novice monks except for the rule about not touching money. The anagāriya training period usually takes three months or so. You are ready for the next step when the head monk (abbot) feels you are ready. It takes time to get used to walking in a skirt anyway! But more importantly, it gives one time to get used to the monastic training and expectations a monastic must fulfill. The robes keep one mindful of how one should behave. One who behaves correctly protects oneself from doing wrongful actions. If I do harmful actions, I will harm myself as well as others around me. In other words, the robes protect me, and I am very happy to be in them. As one friend asked, “Do I call you anything different?” No. Just Jeremy will do me fine for now. I’m still a regular person for the time being, but I hope to continue onward in my spiritual progression.

There is nothing too special about the Thai hello or goodbye other than that it has extremely polite connotations, so...

“Many goodbyes to you my friends. May you be well, happy, and shine from a distance.”

Jeremy

Actually, I could use your luminosity to see the ants on the way to my ku□ i at night.

Monastery Note 2: Today Is Monastery Day

January 17, 2001

It's been very difficult to report new information about the life here at the monastery since nearly every day is the same. You have already seen the schedule in the last note. There are times when we have a full schedule, times when we have a half schedule, and times when we don't have a schedule at all. In any case, it is nearly the same type of experience every day. We call this the monastery life. Some people call it a structured environment, while other people will call it "life." So I was thinking about how I could justify staying here day after day with the same events happening over and over again, when it hit me. It literally hit me when I bumped my head for the *fifth time* on a fan mounted on the wall while sweeping one of the meeting rooms as part of my daily chores. You could say I was "blown away" by it too! I realized what should be done in a monastery. I realized that every day should be an effort to change.

I have a favorite Buddhist movie. It is not *The Matrix*, *Seven Years in Tibet* or *Kundun*. It's a movie that hardly anyone would think of as Buddhist, but shines like a blow torch once you know what to look for. It's *Groundhog Day*.

“Groundhog Day? with Bill Murray?” you might say in disbelief, but yes, it is my favorite BUDDHIST movie. For those who haven’t seen it, let me tell you the plot and THE ENDING. Bill Murray plays a weather reporter who has to do a story on the town where the Groundhog Day tradition supposedly originated. He is not the nicest or the happiest guy, and is not interested in traveling to this remote town for an “on location” report. He is, however, interested in a beautiful co-worker who came on the trip. Because she can see right through him and goes for a completely different guy, she is not interested in the Bill Murray character.

The story starts as he finishes the on-location weather report and is all set to go home when a snowstorm hits. He stays another night at his bed and breakfast hotel only to wake up the next morning on Groundhog Day for the second time. The same people approach him and he reacts to them in exactly the same way. It’s a constant *deja vu* the whole day. He goes to bed in total disbelief, only to wake up the next morning stuck again in Groundhog Day. He ends up in the same day over and over and over again. He relives Groundhog Day a seemingly endless number of times.

After a while, Bill Murray realizes he can experiment with his day. He gets creative with different ways to get out of this Groundhog Day zone. He even tries suicide but still wakes up the next morning in the same bed. After realizing he cannot escape, he decides on a daily goal of trying to make his co-worker interested in him. After many repeated Groundhog Days and constant failures at making her interested, he finally asks her what type of guy she would like to date. She then describes her dream man: a man who is nice, helpful, caring, loving, etc. This dream man had every quality that Bill Murray completely lacked. He soon realized that impressing her would require him to change his whole being or sense of self. This was something he could not fake. That became his new goal. He had no other interest and was bored with the other possible options this “one-day town” had to offer.

His goal of changing himself did not depend on the external events of the Groundhog Day zone. Eventually, he changed his total being and took pride in helping the community. He was naturally loved by the town and finally by his co-worker. All of this was accomplished in one day’s time. He changed his whole being. He learned that by changing himself he could change the way his whole day was experienced. After he did this, only then did

he wake up in the real next day. Oops! I spoiled the end of the movie!

I've always told people that this movie gives the most detailed and entertaining expression of rebirth. It does this by shortening the lifespan to one day. In short, he dies and gets reborn in the Groundhog Day zone, every day.

1. He cannot hold on to anything that he has accumulated after that day ends.

2. He can only retain his knowledge, wisdom, behavior, attitude, and habit patterns.

3. He is given a gift of past-life memories (previous Groundhog Days).

4. He is able to see how the law of cause and effect works by experimenting and trying different actions to bring about different results. With this, he has found that helping others is the key to happiness rather than the key to his co-worker's interest.

“Groundhog Day” came to mind when I bumped my head on the fan in the meeting room for the fifth time. It reminded me of when Bill Murray steps into a puddle countless times. We have a similar structured daily schedule. It only changes slightly based on the day before

the quarter phase of the moon, the day of the moon itself, and the day after. I realized I was doing many of the same things over and over even after I told myself there would be no way I could possibly do them again.

It wasn't just the fan. Every day started to become "Groundhog Day." It wasn't always the same, but eventually the same events would repeat. Since one's being is defined by one's behavior and habit patterns, it is predictable that my responses to these situations would be quite similar, whether they were good or bad. Unless I change internally, they will repeat themselves over and over again. The way I see it, I can maintain the qualities that bring good responses while attempting to change the qualities that give rise to unpleasant responses. Part of the difficulty lies in awareness of these qualities and deciding which responses are good and which are bad.

This movie is the most inspiring film I have seen to this day. I once owned a VCR, and *Groundhog Day* was the only movie I had for nearly two years. The ongoing joke was that I could watch it over and over again! Since I never bothered to buy a TV or to go along with the VCR, the other ongoing joke was that I had a \$300 clock that blinks with the wrong time. Viewing the repeating monastery

schedule in the same manner as *Groundhog Day* seems the only way to survive, and better yet, to grow. Otherwise the monastery might be viewed as a prison. Responding mindlessly to life's circumstances is the prison, not the monastery!

Life is a prison? If I really thought about it, I was always living the same day over and over again whether I was inside or outside the monastery. Working as a programmer, a teacher or traveling to different countries always turned into the same day! Do you get what I'm trying to say? There is a saying in America: "Wherever you go, there you are." Escaping the self is not possible according to most people. However, even though a Buddhist created this "Wherever you go" cliché, Buddhists do not believe in an eternal self. The self is composed of components that are always changing and cannot be clung to. Desires and clinging are identity, ego, or self. We usually describe ourselves in terms of what we like or dislike.

I wish to metamorphose myself into a new person. I'll be the first to admit that I hate "my-self." As long as there is greed, hatred, and delusion, I should strive to change to get rid of those traits. Getting rid of them is not an easy

task, nor a pleasant one either! I have a long road ahead of me. Only faith and determination can help me with my task, just as they helped Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*.

Changing oneself to the point where one is a completely different person can be an easy way to view rebirth. One does not need to die for reincarnation to take place. Reincarnations do not happen every now and then. Rather they happen every moment. Take a burning candle, for instance. When does a tall candle become reincarnated into a short candle? When does a dirty or high river become a clean or low river? Constantly, they become new rivers and new candle flames. It is difficult to see the subtle rebirths in a person as each moment passes by. It is like trying to watch your hair or nails grow. But I look at my life and note some major rebirths that have taken place. Actually, I have counted 10 different lives as an adult not to mention as a kid. I've lived in so many different ways. I've always told myself that I could die today an experienced and happy man. To become a monk is the culmination of it all. I feel as though I must do it. It is my destiny!

* * * * *

“To be or not to be.”

I have recently decided to leave the monastery. Whahh? After all my praise of it, and the hard work and sacrifices to get here? Before I continue, I think it's time to tell you my watch story.

You might have noticed a spiritual change when I arrived in New Zealand. It was not just the emergency evacuation from Fiji and my grandfather's death at the same time that prompted a re-focus on my Buddhist path. Something happened in Fiji and I had kept it out of these notes... until now.

While I was in Kauai and Fiji, it was quite evident that I was losing my Buddhist path. You may have questioned my writings and said to yourself, "Is he really going to follow through with this monk thing?" You may have asked this question once or twice, but let me tell you that the question has plagued me throughout the entire trip.

So the story... (before you wring it out of me).

When in Fiji, I was in the ocean showing these two travelers how to play "Shark Attack" and "Whale Breaching." "Shark Attack" is a simple game where you pretend that a shark is eating you alive, like a scene from the movie "Jaws." Each person takes turns trying to perform a more realistic or humorous shark attack. In

“Whale Breaching,” you jump out of the water and then flops onto your side just like a whale would do during mating season. These are some of my favorite games to play in the water, and they surely kick butt over the usual “Swim to Nowhere” or “Marco Polo.”

After returning from the water a few hours later, I looked at my wrist to find out how much longer we had to wait until tea time and noticed my watch was missing! It seemed I had lost it while playing “Shark Attack.” A member of my “Shark Attack” audience said they saw something fly off my wrist as I submerged and waved my hands for help during my Oscar performance, “The Fijians Are Not the Only Ones Who Eat Humans.” Unfortunately, that audience member passed off my airborne watch as seaweed and did not mention it to me. OOPS!!!

I immediately got some snorkel gear and started searching. It was not to be found. After dinner, when it was low tide, I decided to take another look... Still no watch. I told some Fijian kids I would give them lots of money if they found it. They looked around for a few minutes and gave up, thinking it was silly to look for a watch after it had been lost in the ocean for four or five hours.

Losing the watch was quite symbolic for me since it was most useful for waking up early at the monasteries and timing my meditations with its countdown timer – that is, whenever I reserved the time to meditate. The frequency of meditation sessions during my trip had quickly dwindled, and so did my Buddhist path. Losing my watch was a big message for me. I wondered if it was possible to recover what I had lost... and that ain't the watch I'm talking about either!

Later that very night I had trouble sleeping. I happened to wake up as the sun was starting to rise. The sky was red, the beach was empty, and the water was low. As I was walking, I asked myself, "I wonder if I can find my watch this morning?" As I approached the shore, I thought about how impossible it would be to find a watch lost in the ocean for a whole day and a whole night. I said to myself, *"If I find my watch, I will definitely become a monk! No more games - I will really do it."* Almost immediately from the distance I could see something flip-flopping as the calm morning ocean waves lapped the shore's edge. As I walked closer, I saw that it was the black Velcro strap of my watch floating with the face half-buried in the sand. The water was still passing over it. I hesitated for a moment, smiled, and felt something like a defeat or

possibly a surrender. There were no more games I could play to excuse myself from ordaining.

Standing in front of my watch, I thought of the impossible “*If I find my watch...*” promise I’d made, which I thought I would never be held accountable for. Nobody would ever know if I just kept on walking, but finding the watch was just too much of a coincidence to let this moment of truth simply drift away. I lowered myself down to pick up the watch. I had to be true to who I was, or what I was to become. As I picked it up, I felt it was one of the heaviest things I had ever picked up. Change and destiny, especially my own, bore a lot of weight. After this, the only question was *when* I would become a monk, and that was only a matter of time.

So... destiny or whatever... I have decided to leave Wat Pa Nanachat. I have decided to leave for many reasons. Wat Pa Nanachat is a big monastery that has many different monks. It is also changing all the time. I’ve only been here for a few months and only one of the original monks (excluding the abbot) are still here. A few disrobed but most went to branch monasteries, while others who were away came back. Everything is always changing. Throughout this change I’ve gotten a closer look at the

monastery. Rather than list what I didn't like about it, I will say that there are far too many good points about it that might be covered up by mentioning the bad. A white shirt only needs a little bit of dye to make it another color. There are other monasteries with different colors, and each is different from the others. One thing I've clung to is the fact that this tradition is the biggest and the one making the most headway in the West. I decided not to limit myself based on this sense of security and I will be heading to Burma.

If Burma doesn't seem like it will work for me, I will not stop there (I hope). I will head over to Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a very good place for Westerners to ordain because English is the language spoken in a lot of the monasteries. The monks in these countries are allowed to live their fantasy life of a monk, but people usually get burned out there as well. As my programming teacher once said about C++, "This language gives you a lot of slack to do as you please. You can also use this slack to tie a noose and hang yourself." The same can be said about monasteries that let you do your own thing. I would like to try something in between Wat Pa Nanachat and the "on your own" monasteries in Sri Lanka. I will have to see what happens. In any case, these countries were on my original itinerary

(see travel note 1). The quest is still on! I have actually contemplated for the first time in a long while the idea of NOT being a monk. That's right, Mom. And you should know better than anyone else that my mind changes like the wind. I am a Libra in case you forgot. With all that said, I only had these thoughts for a couple of moments before they went away.

I still feel in my heart that I WILL become a successful lifelong monk. I told the abbot a story in the same breath as "I'm leaving soon." It goes like this. When I graduated from my university with a teaching degree, I decided that teaching would not be my career path. A spiritual teacher told me to try the computer business. It was new, the market was tight, and I would learn a lot about how the logical mind works. I didn't want to get a Computer Science degree because I was already in the middle of finishing my Technology Education degree. I was also afraid of the math requirement. Furthermore, at the time of my schooling, university teaching was based on a computer programming language called Pascal. But, back in '92-93, the industry was using a language called C and moving to C++.

A programming friend of mine told me to skip the BS (this can be taken to mean an education degree or the stuff that comes from a bull) and to learn C. He recommended the famous book, *The C Programming Language* – a classic which tells you everything you need to know about programming in less than two hundred pages. I didn't get past the first exercise without having many problems and moved on to a different book. In the next book, I got past the first few exercises, but hit a brick wall when it came to learning an abstract programming technique called "pointers." If you don't know "pointers" then you cannot become a C or C++ programmer! (Java, a better-known language, does not have pointers because they are so difficult to learn.) Book after book after book after book. I think I borrowed or bought nearly 10 or 15 introductory programming books. Finally, I was able to groove with a book called *Workout C*.

After becoming a professional programmer, I looked at the first book I had started with. It was surely not for a fresh beginner. However, for someone with prior programming knowledge in other languages, that book would be just the right thing. I've even recommended it to friends! Even though the first book was not for first-timers, all the other

books were suitable for learning the C language without any prior programming knowledge.

So what am I getting at? It wasn't necessarily the book that was the problem. Rather, it was me who was not ready for the way the information was presented. Nothing was wrong with the teaching styles of the books. It all depended on what I was ready for at that time. My success in learning how to program was due to my persistence and my unwillingness to give up. Eventually I became ready for any book that came my way. *Workout C* came in the style that I needed when I was ripe and ready. I'm hoping that the right monastery will come my way at the time I'm ready for it too. No book is perfect and neither is any monastery. When "The Teaching" is understood, the failed methodologies may not seem so bad later on.

In the case of learning computers, each book brought me to a new but limited level of understanding. The same can be said about each monastery. I have learned much at Wat Pa Nanachat. I have learned the most about Buddhism here compared to any other place. I have also spent the longest amount of time at this monastery too.

I cannot tell you how great this trip has been for me. As you know, this trip had been long awaited. When it ends, I

will hopefully be able to settle down. If that be in India, Hawaii, or Sri Lanka... who knows? I only know that experience is the key to really knowing what to do. I wish I could take other people's advice and avoid the trouble of "seeing for myself." That has always gotten me into a lot of trouble in the past. Even so, I feel that it has led to my success as well. I'm not afraid to fail. This way of experiencing things for myself has led to invaluable insights which cannot be put into words.

So now I'm in Bangkok, writing another "last" travel note. I'm waiting for my Burmese visa and then will fly out of here today. The abbot allowed me to stay in white robes while in transit to Burma even though he said it would be embarrassing, since people in Bangkok and other areas will think I am a transvestite nun. I won't understand their language when they make fun of me, so it doesn't matter. Like I said, the robes help me stay mindful of the precepts I have vowed to follow. If one is ever mindful, one is ever protected.

I'd love to tell you more, but I have to rush to the airport and I heard that there is NO E-MAIL in Myanmar. I mailed this disk to my sister from the airport. (My sister got the disk, but conveniently misplaced it due to mixed feelings about not seeing me for a long time.)

So long for now... I wish you all well abiding and much true love in your life.

Jeremy

Monastery Note 3: Going for Broke at Pa-Auk Meditation Center

April 1, 2001

I remember when I was in Fiji acting out one of my fantasies of playing poker while smoking cigars. An American woman who had just arrived from Japan noticed I had a great big ol' smile on my face. I told her about my poker fantasy and explained that most men my age have fantasies about women, but I'm not like most men. She pondered that and then told me I needed a new fantasy now that I had lived this one. Not long after that, I lost my watch and made the determination to follow through with my dream of becoming a monk.

Destiny or fantasy, my life is now in a gamble. This time everything is real and the chips are not broken shells. There is much to sacrifice when becoming a monk. It requires a lot of risk and the odds are stacked against me too. Still, without hesitation, I find myself risking it all for the big reward. I must give up everything I once defined myself as. The ancient Buddhist texts describe a bhikkhu as "one who has gone forth from the householder's life to the homeless life." Everything is now on the gambling

table of enlightenment. It looks like it's all or nothing because I am one who is going for broke....

Had all the travel notes gotten to you as quickly as I wanted, you would already know that my name is no longer Jeremy and I am no longer a layperson. My name is Bhikkhu S. (the full name was used in the original emails, but not given here to preserve his anonymity. As the name conveys, I'm a bhikkhu or monk as Westerners know us. So I'm at the end of the road, or starting a new one. I'm living the fantasy that only enlightenment will complete. However, there is a catch. Now that I finally get to live my dream as a monk, I find that the goal is to awaken! Sometimes you can never win!

I don't know what has been posted or not, so let me summarize the previous travel note. I left Wat Pa Nanachat, deciding to move on to Myanmar (Burma) and check out this monastery I heard mixed reviews of. In my first monastery post, I described how the ku□i is a great place to be, but one does not get enough time there because of required chores, meetings, and various projects. I then decided that "I could always go to Burma later."

My thought was that I could go to Burma to meditate as much as I wanted AFTER my six years of training. Then again, who wants to wait when there are so many snakes in Thailand? Certainly not this impatient Buddhist! Although it is bad to have many strong desires, having a strong desire to practice meditation is OK in the Buddhist religion.

So, after reading Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw's book, *Knowing and Seeing* I rushed to the Pa-Auk Meditation Center in Burma (<http://www.paaukforestmonastery.org/>). *Knowing and Seeing* is an instruction manual for the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*), an ancient Buddhist text. It covers many of the details not mentioned clearly in the original holy scriptures called suttas. Topics include absorption concentration, seeing the particles of the body, knowing mentality, remembering past lives, and of course how to reach the further shore of Nibbāna. Most people have written off this ancient book as a lot of hopeful thinking that no one achieves. However, Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw's book says that all of it can be achieved. (A PDF copy of *Knowing and Seeing* can be found at <https://goo.gl/3oihFz>).

“Is this guy for real? Why are there 400 to 500 residents at his monastery? He must be doing something right,” I said to myself. With a little more digging, I found out that the monastery is located in the bowels of a Myanmar jungle, complete with third-world sanitary conditions, full-on malaria warnings (by the locals), political instability and visa problems to top it off. With all of this to deter visitors, why are there so many people there? Hmmmm. I left Thailand for Myanmar to go and see. I was on a quest to find the monastery that might be too good to be true. Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw is a teacher known for his great teaching abilities, compassion, knowledge, and ability to inspire. It sounds like something too good to be true, like a fresh coconut ice cream donation for monks. (That was my donation to WPN on my last day.)

To come to this monastery with the intention to stay for a long time means one is not fearful of the clear and apparent dangers. People who come with this in mind already have the effort and determination needed to succeed. Special people are attracted to this place, and most residents were very accomplished in their careers before they left it all behind. I wish I could tell you if anybody succeeds, but it is against one of the 227 rules.

Because of the difficulties associated with coming here, a sort of natural selection process seems to take place. When I was working for Bayer, we hired yet another Russian immigrant who claimed to be a world-ranked chess player. I told him I played every now and then and might be interested in a game. He gave me a deep and slow Russian chuckle and told me he could *beat* me “blind” and laughed even more when I didn’t know what “playing blind” meant. It turned out that he is “blind” because he chooses not to see the board while his opponent can. The opponent calls out the moves for him to build the active chessboard in his mind.

Since I had a Palm Pilot chess game downloaded, I called his bluff. But it was not a bluff. He ended up whipping the pants off me. Later, I asked my friend who was also a Russian immigrant if all Russian people are so smart or only the ones that come to America. He told me that getting out of Russia as a Jew is very easy, but getting into America takes a lot of smart scheming and thinking. This is why it seemed that all Russians were smart. Plus, I had only come in contact with Russians who knew programming.

Let's suppose you like golf. Your dream retirement package includes a condo on a golf course with a decent golf pro to help you with your swing. Imagine a world where golf was considered very worthwhile and only special kinds of people could play it. Anyone who could play golf or desired to play golf was worshiped. Now imagine a "Shivas Irons" golf monastery (Shivas Irons is a mystical golf pro and philosopher in books by Michael Murphy, including *Golf in the Kingdom*). Anyone who wants to play golf at this monastery is welcome, but it is not just a golf monastery. It's one that teaches you how to get a hole in one any time you desire. It sounds too good to be true, but the golf pros can do it any time they wish. The local people provide you with a single-room house with bath, food, and golf supplies. All you must do is agree to play three rounds of golf every day you stay there. All this is provided for free, including the teaching of these very special golf pros! Even though there are good teachers, to be able to play three rounds every day would attract only students with lots of effort and determination. Of this select population, only a small percentage (if any) would be able to get a hole in one. This is the type of place I am at. The difference is that a hole in one is equivalent to controlling the mind. To think about one object (the

breath) for three or four hours without anything else coming into the mind is the goal. That is my goal.

Meeting Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw was surely the first step towards my goal. In India, I wanted to see S. N. Goenka, but he was visiting the West while I was trying to visit him in the East. A similar situation happened with Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw, but the reason for his absence was more serious. He had spent the last four months in a Singapore hospital recovering from various illnesses. The good news was that he was going to return to the monastery in ONE WEEK!! Great timing.

Let's review... I left the woman of my dreams (almost a monk-stopper) so I could check into a monastery (any monastery) before October 6th, my 30th birthday. I spent four months there, and then suddenly had this urge to go to Burma a week before this amazing teacher comes back after four months of sick leave. In other words, I was protected in the monastery of Wat Pa Nanachat until the time was right to see Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw. You might call it a coincidence, but I've had too many of these to pass them off as that anymore. (Maybe I've really flipped my lid, as my father claims).

So “I gets to this a-here monastery” (NY talk) and I’m ready to check in, based on the idea that I can meditate as much as I want, but that was only the Lower Monastery experience! The Lower Monastery is where the lay yogis and older monks who cannot walk very far for their meals live. There are actually three monasteries here.

On the full moon, I visited the Forest Monastery, AY YAI YAI!!!!

A twenty-minute walk down the monastery road leads you to the forest monastery with roughly 150 bhikkhu residents (in 2017, there were over 500 bhikkhu residents). Another ten-minute walk up the mountain puts you at the base of this HUGE meditation hall. If there were tourism in Burma, this would be a spot to check out. It made me feel the same awe and wonder as the Ajantā caves in India. If they built it the same way they are building the hospital here now, then they did not use many power tools. It’s amazing just to look at this meditation hall. It would take many pages to describe it, so let’s just say that it is massive, impressive, and USED BY MEDITATORS, not by tourists.

Where do I sign up? “I’m sorry but we cannot change tourist visas to meditation visas,” they said to me. “You

will have to leave the country and come back on a meditation visa.” Whaaa? Did I mention that I no longer have any money since I made the preparations to ordain while at WPN? I only had US\$600 to my name. A visa run to Thailand would burn \$200-\$300 of this money.

A friend of mine told me I should wait for the Sayadaw to return. If he liked me, he might ask someone to help. When the Sayadaw returned, I asked if it were possible. He spoke to the same person who earlier told me a visa change was not possible. Then he turned to me and repeated those same words. The next day, someone told me I should ask again because that day had been busy and overwhelming for him. He hadn’t fully recovered from his illnesses.

The next day, I asked again and told him about my intention to ordain, my lifelong dream of becoming a monk, my shattered dream at WPN, etc. Things seemed different now and he told me that there may be a chance with a different approach. He told me to go to Yangon in the car that drove him to Mawlamyine and see what could be done. If nothing could be done, I needed to go to Yangon to leave the country anyway. Did I tell you that getting here

was a ten-hour overnight bus ride? The car will leave the next day. Get prepared.

The next day I got into this enormous white Toyota Land Cruiser. It was a Safari stretch limo. The driver was a high roller from Yangon and with this car he really was a high roller. His English was pretty good, yet as we were driving I wondered about his English skills. You see, a Land Cruiser is a sport utility vehicle, but when he bought the car, I think he really wanted a sports car and may have said “sport vehicle” through a translation error. I could just imagine him going to the dealership and saying, “I want a sport vehicle” and not wanting to upset the salesman when he rolled out this Land Cruiser. It’s a really nice car. So... we are driving VERY FAST on these Myanmar roads. Can you say,

BUMMMMPEEE AND JUMMMMPEEEE?

We actually jumped an on-ramp to one of the bridges... and you should see some of these Myanmar bridges, with shrines at the entrance – for “last prayers”? At first I was scared but after a few hundred near misses with some ox-carts, I realized that he actually knew what he was doing. Furthermore, the Land Cruiser was the fastest car money could buy. He ended up being a very valuable friend and

helped me get my visa changed to a renewable meditation visa.

It took a few weeks to get my visa change confirmed in Yangon. I then came back to the monastery and ordained on February 7, 2001 with Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw as my preceptor. It was a very beautiful day and 198 bhikkhus were in attendance on that full moon day. My dream was just starting to unfold, to blossom, and to shine.

After a few days of being a bhikkhu, I was assigned a kuñi on top of the mountain. It is so wonderful to be able to be in a kuñi as much as I want. When I was in Thailand, I described how beautiful a kuñi can be, but finding time to stay inside was difficult. Perhaps that was the main reason why I left Wat Pa Nanachat. I love meditation and that is the reason for wanting to become a bhikkhu in the first place. I never felt as though they allotted enough time to meditate. This monastery allows me as much time as I want. I can meditate all day in my kuñi or the meditation hall. I really enjoy this freedom. When I was younger, I wrote a song about such a place, although I never really knew what I was actually describing.

Here are some of the words to the song written back in 1989:

Up on the Holy Mountain,
I see a very nice spot for me.
Right there I could build a tiny little shack
And sit and overlook the sea.

All there would be is me and the mountain,
And that would be plenty enough for me.
Right there, I could do anything I wanted to do,
And that is where I will spread my wings.

I'm gonna climb on the mountain
Until the mountain climbs on me.
Climbing higher and higher
Until I set my spirit free.

– The Holy Mountain,” Me.

In my last travel note, I explained how every day felt like the same. Yet at this monastery every day really is the same! It only varies by having to attend a one-hour meeting on the new and full moon days. Rather than bore you with another schedule, I will just say that we meditate

8+ hours per day, eat, and sleep. There are no meetings, and rarely is there an afternoon drink. If we are lucky enough to receive one, that break lasts only a few minutes. That's just about all we do here, and that was exactly what I was searching for!

The food here is great. I'm working on my fourth added kilo since I got here (that's ten pounds). Although I don't have any recipes for these dishes, I think I've got them all figured out. Take one cup of oil and one cup of tomato sauce, add a few chilies, a handful of salt and a potato, and you've got authentic Burmese cuisine. It looks gross and makes you squint the first couple of times you try it, but it grows on you... literally! It is also hard to stop eating once you start, sort of like potato chips. I prefer the Burmese food over the special bland and dry "foreigner" food they prepare for us (leave out the oil, salt, sauce, and chilies and add vegetables and tofu).

However, sometimes I really appreciate the bland food. I recently got over my first "sickness" ...hopefully. It was my first sickness not only as a monk but in all my Asia and third-world travels. (I got sick *before* going to India). It is quite scary to get sick while traveling, and even worse to get sick as a bhikkhu. As a traveler, I had money and could

be back home in a flash if I wanted. As a bhikkhu, I don't have this option, and I'm left at the mercy of the doctors who volunteer at the clinic twice a week. It is even scarier when they give you medicine and it helps, but then the sickness comes back with a vengeance! I don't think I have ever been so drained of energy. (Almost the whole monastery got this bug.) In any case, a funny thought came to mind while squatting on the toilet, hoping for the undigested fluid that was in my stomach to come out the other end.

When I was in Hawaii, I used the hippie phrase "this is the shit" quite often. I even used it in a few travel notes. I now think I know origin of this phrase. I can just imagine some hippie in the early eighties who visited Freak Street in Nepal and caught some type of bug for a week, a month, or longer. His bowel movements were never right, and they were too soft, too liquid, too hard, or maybe there were none at all. I can just imagine the day he started to feel better and the PERFECT bowel movement just passed through him and he knew it as it passed! Everything just felt right. But just to make sure, he reached down into the toilet water and picked it up, squeezed it to make sure it was just right, and then started to cry in laughter... an insane laughter of joy, screaming from a squat position,

“This is the shit.... This is the shit!” He was no longer interested in finding enlightenment or himself. He had now lowered his standard to searching for the perfect bowel movement.

So, I’m quite happy with life as a monk. In fact, very happy. The other day, I was washing my bowl (something we do before every meal) with a big smile on my face when a German bhikkhu asked me why I was smiling. I told him that we are so lucky to live this life as a bhikkhu. He looked at me and said, “What makes you think this all of a sudden?” I responded, “I think this nearly every day. Just as a man who is in love with a woman can tell her that he loves her as many times as he wishes, so too can a bhikkhu rejoice in his bhikkhu life!” (The monk later told me he wrote down what I had said and hung the quote on his wall).

I really love this life. When I was in Kauai, I admired the external beauty almost every day. Now I admire the internal beauty almost every day too. My parents think that I’m a failure for giving up my lucrative computer career while I was at my peak. (Isn’t that when you should quit?) If I ever had kids, I would measure my success on how much beauty my kid saw within himself. Not the

career, wife, 2.3 kids, house, or the “sport vehicle” parked outside.

I recently sent a letter to my mother thanking her for my life because I’m so happy. I thanked my parents for whatever they did, good or bad. It all led me to this point in my life. The goal is to be happy in the end, not necessarily in the middle or beginning. Thanks, Mom and Dad!

So it has been nearly two years since I left home and nine months since I left my German friend for the monastic life. I have been at this monastery as a bhikkhu since February and plan to stay on for the rest of my life. But everything always changes, especially when you’ve got stomach problems. I meditate 8+ hours per day, which sometimes includes a straight 4-hour sitting session. The goal? To still the mind, to have no thoughts, to only watch the breath and nothing else. I leave you with a poem. I find it has many possible meanings.

Still breathing in...

Still breathing out...

Still...

With all possible good wishes to you....

Bhikkhu S.

Monastery Note 4: Two Ping One

December 8, 2002

When I was a child when my mother would cook one of my favorite dishes, spaghetti with her homemade tomato sauce. She would usually be yapping on the telephone while she prepared dinner as the telephone cord became more and more tangled. When the time was right, she would take out her white enamel pot and set the water to boil with a dash of oil and salt. It was the dash of oil I was most interested in, not because it prevented the spaghetti from sticking, but because it became very interesting to look at. As the water would begin to heat up, separate miniature oil slicks would start to move and swirl around. This was my favorite part! You see, as the oil slowly began to move around, it would be inevitable that two oil clusters would get closer and closer to each other. It seemed almost like a cosmic attraction between two inanimate objects that could not exist, but there it was. So they would get closer and closer until finally you knew there could no longer be a separation between the two. It was that split second, that moment of unification, where a magical “PING” would occur. “PING,” the two were now one. You could almost hear the “PING” too! In my childhood and as a teenager, I didn’t know why I was so attracted to this

strange phenomenon, but now, after much contemplation, I realize that it was the unification of it all, a reverse mitosis, the at-one-ment, or simply the meaning of true love. Two PING one!

I never really told anyone about this until now except for my German friend. If I remember correctly, she wrote me once telling me that her thesis project as a medical student was on reverse mitosis. You could say we had a lot in common! Two Ping One!

So most of you would probably like to know more about this magical place that I live in, why I have stayed here for so long, and what I have been doing all this time! In reality, there is really not much to say. I meditate nearly all the time and do nothing else except eat (only one meal a day) and sleep. That statement may leave you a little confused because you are living in a totally different reality. So... I will continue with some more stories to reveal more about what I'm now all about, or striving to achieve.

One of the last of the big-screen movies I saw before switching to the monastic life was *American Beauty*. I'm sure most of you have seen this film since I would guess it won all the worthwhile awards. In any case, let me summarize the theme for you. To my eyes the theme was

the exploration of what is beautiful. It starts when a father becomes infatuated with his daughter's friend, a beautiful cheerleader. That was the start of the unfolding events that led to his quest for the beautiful. Throughout the movie, the characters live out their fantasies only to find out the ultimate truth about fantasies: They are best left in the mind.

The father quits his job, extorts his boss for a nice severance pay, and starts trying to live like a teenager as he remembers it. He starts working on his physique and smoking marijuana. He gets a job at a burger joint, tries to re-spark his marriage, and of course gets an opportunity to start something with the beautiful cheerleader. The other characters run away to the other side of the country, cheat on their spouses, and build their careers. At the end of the film the father decides that family was the thing that is most beautiful or important to him.

For many people, FAMILY seems like a logical answer to the question, "What is beautiful?" Although I believe my family is beautiful and I hold them very dear to me, I do not believe that family is the answer to this question. Did the screenwriters leave the question unanswered, or did they answer it in a subtle way so they would not offend the

masses who believe that family is the only true meaning of what is “beautiful?”

The question was answered, but not in a direct manner. Those who meditate are able to condition themselves to look for the beautiful subtleties of life. This was the answer and also *how* the question was answered. One of the characters, a video photography buff, suddenly blurts out to his prospective girlfriend, “Want to see the most beautiful thing I ever filmed?” It turns out to be 15 minutes of a useless thrown-away plastic bag blowing in the wind (at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3OhrWr5lzk> you can see part of this scene). As they watch the video, he says:

It was one of those days when it's a minute away from snowing. And there's this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it, right? And this bag was just... dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. That's the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid. Ever.

Video's a poor excuse, I know. But it helps me remember... I need to remember...

Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can't take it... and my heart is going to cave in.



Yes, that was the answer to the question of what is beautiful: Unification of it all, a reverse mitosis, the at-one-ment, or simply the meaning of true love. Two PING One! To really understand the meaning of this answer, one must see it as a poetic metaphor for meditation. This scene creates a feeling of being free and peaceful. We have all seen something similar to this in real life, but knowledge of meditation will reveal why there is that feeling of being free and peaceful.

So this is the beautiful segue to explain the meditation technique taught at this monastery. It is quite simple. The meditation yogis are instructed to focus on the breath in a continuous manner. When concentration gets strong and more directed at a single object, a meditation sign (*nimitta*) will appear. When this sign becomes unified with the breath and there is no discernible difference between the two, the sign will get brighter and brilliant until there is a sense of feeling extremely free and peaceful. Other words like true love, the infinite, joy, bliss, and oneness-of-it-all

might describe this feeling of good, solid concentration as well. At our monastery we call this *samādhi*. If you remember from the last note, most people outside of this monastery believe this is an impossible achievement, and nothing more than a fantasy, a pipe dream, or as real as the Easter Bunny!

In the movie, a useless plastic bag was blowing in the wind, but how does one know the wind was blowing? It was the bag that made the wind visible. This is a good metaphor for that meditation sign. Unification! That is the *real* reason why the scene created a feeling of being peaceful, free, and at ease. The bag was the wind, and the wind was the bag. There was only one point of focus, but the infinite wholeness of the wind was included in that one point. I am quite sure the screenwriter was someone who meditates. In fact, doesn't it seem logical that the character personifying the screenwriter would be the video photography buff who lived next door?

I am convinced that the entertainment industry is littered with people who either meditate or can see the light. It is a little easier to see this in the music industry, since it comes out in their lyrics and CD titles. For instance, Van Morrison puts a genuine meditation sign on his

Enlightenment CD. Tori Amos is standing on a pink sphere on her *Into the Pink* CD. Phish says they can see the light on their *Billy Breathes* CD. Madonna named one of her CDs *Ray of Light*. Tangerine Dream named one of their CD's *Underwater Sunlight*. Others include the Grateful Dead, John Lennon, Peter Gabriel, Zazen, Prince, Sting, John and Sara McLaughlin, Stevie Nicks, Cat Stevens, Delirium, William Orbit (who produced Madonna's *Ray of Light*), Enigma, Lisa Gerard, and I would guess Keith Jarrett too, although I have no proof of that. There are countless others, I am sure.

You might think I am crazy for having this theory, but why do you think they call them stars! They shine with the unseen light of *samādhi*! Meditation gurus usually target these stars not necessarily because they are rich, but because they are easy to pick out as the ones who will be successful in seeing the clear light of *samādhi*. Those who are successful, who achieve *samādhi*, will think it is the best thing in life, better than anything imaginable. When they reach this goal, they may offer their guru anything. Luckily, my teacher and those who follow the rules of Theravada Buddhism are celibate, and do not touch money nor consent to have it accepted for them.

Sometimes, it is the unseen things that get revealed that can be so beautiful. I remember writing a song called “Pointing at the Moon” back in... hmm... 1996. It’s about the old Chinese parable of the wise man pointing at the moon for his students. The parable demonstrates the difficulties of explaining or showing what enlightenment is about. At a simpler level, proper meditation is difficult to explain too. Although the wise man is pointing at the moon, the students who hypothetically don’t know what a moon is, mistake the pointing finger for the moon. Here is a portion of the song:

I want to know about everything,
Why I’m here and
Why I think.
The Beauty that I just can’t see,
The Beauty that is part of everything.
So... Were you pointing at the moon?
Ahh! The Beauty I never knew.

– “Pointing at the Moon,” 1996, Me.

I think back to 1998 when I was at a Phish concert that drew some seventy to eighty thousand people all the way to the northern tip of Maine! During a song called “Harry Ho”
(at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yx1SfR9DV3k>) I was trying to judge if the band had that same “tickle my spine” peaceful and free magic as the Grateful Dead (their predecessor). I decided that they did have the magic, but it was a little more difficult to see, since they targeted a slightly different listening audience who like faster and more complicated music. Phish and the Grateful Dead, although they haven’t sold many CDs or records, have made the top ten gross ticket sales year after year. Believe it or not, they are some of the richest bands in the industry! Why is this? It is because of their ability to draw fans into an active group meditation in which the band also participates. Jerry Garcia, of the Grateful Dead, once said, “We are just a part of it.”

“Harry Hood,” is a song about the Claymation character who lives in a refrigerator depicted in a Hood® television commercial. It has only two lines, but like many of their other songs lasts 15-20 minutes. One of the lines says, “Harry, Harry, where do you go when the lights go out?” At this time the lighting crew shut off all the lights, even the ones on stage, while the audience threw an uncountable number of multi-colored glow-sticks in the air. Everyone, including the band members, was enjoying this animated multicolored random display of beauty. It seemed as

though the music, dancing, and the glow-sticks were all unified. As all of this came together, a feeling of peacefulness and joy filtered in. The band played on, and although the music was improvised, yet it had a certain structure-- everyone seemed to know which note would come next at each moment. That's why the fans would say, "Trey [the guitar player] was right on that night!" This is unification in a weak form, since it is active and based on the senses, but it is still there. The band has most concerts sold out, and many of the tickets are sold to the same people. This unification has an addictive nature to it, and that is why the fans are so dedicated.

Unification also entails a "letting go" of everything. When I was in Hawaii a born-again Christian once asked me if I wanted to go to a service with a special guest speaker who used to teach New Age meditation. Since I was open to new experiences, I got into her van. The service began with about twenty minutes of country gospel music performed by a live band, but was suddenly silenced as the band members realized that one of the backup singers was speaking in what they believed to be an ancient Hebrew tongue, perhaps from God. Although I've heard rumors that some of these cases have been authenticated, this one

hardly sounded real to me. After the “speaking in tongues” was finished, the special guest speaker started his sermon.

Since the audience had many fanatical Christian devotees, the talk was hardly on the benefits of meditation. At the end of his speech, he asked if anyone in the audience wanted to have the Holy Spirit “enter” them. Before I could raise my hand (hey, I was into experiencing it all) another woman got the honors. I observed what happened. First, he got his Southern Baptist minister accent and rhythm rolling, and then asked her repeatedly to have faith in *Jeee-sus*. He said some other things, and at the end bopped her on the head, and there was a group of people prepared to catch her as she fell. The woman who had fallen was crying at this point, and – you guessed it – the spirit was now inside and the music started to begin again.

I look at that day and try to analyze what happened. I am in no position to claim whether the Holy Spirit did or did not enter her, but I believe that one of the things she experienced was “letting go.” When one completely lets go of everything intense feelings of peace are generated. Faith, whether in Jesus, a guru, the Buddha, or, as Twelve-Step groups claim, even in your dog, helps with this

process of “letting go.” To let something come inside of you, for instance, the Light, one must let go of everything. It is difficult to explain, but if you meditate well, you will understand that letting go allows one to experience the infinite. It is this infinite that creates this peaceful feeling. I wrote another song back in 1996. Here are a few lines.

To let go, and you know I will.

To see the light behind it all and you know I will.

To end this reign of mine and you know I will.

Because I’m gonna shine, and you know I will.

Yes, you know I will.

– “Letting Go,” 1996, Me.

I am not so sure if the person who invited me that day still calls herself a born-again Christian. I usually joke around and tell people that I’m a born-again Buddhist! I guess you would have to understand the philosophy of reincarnation to fully appreciate that humor.

There are many different forms of unification that can take place in the world and in life, but nothing, nothing can top the unification of sitting meditation. So I’ll begin again with my daily schedule: I usually sit alone in my ku□ i all day long and meditate. I come out usually only once or

twice a day, report to my teacher, and get my food and boiled water for the day. (I have recently switched to one meal per day so I can spend more time in my ku□ i, among other reasons). I meditate some more and take a break here or there and then continue meditating some more. Eventually, I become so exhausted from sitting and “doing nothing” all day long that I bow down to my laminated photocopy of a Buddha image three times and fall fast asleep, only to do the same thing the next day.

This might sound like prison to you, eh? If people who lived in prisons were nice, had high standards of moral behavior, and, especially, practiced celibacy, I might not mind prison so much. I enjoy myself. Literally, I take joy in the presence of myself. Most people associate being alone with the word lonely, but if you “enjoy yourself,” being alone can lead to the indescribable. I have heard it said that “alone” means “all-one.” Phish wrote another one of their 15-20 minute songs titled, “I Enjoy Myself” or “You Enjoy Myself.” This is another long song with only two lines. One of the lines reads, “Boy! Man! God! ‘Shyiiit...” I imagine this was said after a meditation-like experience which most improvised music poetically invokes, right before that climactic burst of lyrics... It’s a fun song, and “I enjoy myself” too.

So now maybe the picture I'm trying to paint is becoming clearer. If I said, "All I do is meditate all day long," you might say, "How boring. He's weird, he's flown the coop, or just simply is crazy." My teacher, Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw, says that if you like this place, then you have certain qualities, or as we call it, *pāramī*, for developing meditation. There is no charge to stay here, especially as a bhikkhu, but eventually it comes down to being one who "enjoys oneself." Those who cannot do so and who want an easy and relaxed life eventually leave. Imagine life where you are not only happy, but actually happiest while alone. Imagine how much simpler your life would become, how much peace it would contain, and freedom, if you were happiest alone. This is the life that I have been living for nearly two years.

So you might think that the life of a bhikkhu is one of endurance, but after reading this and some of the previous letters, you might start to believe in the bliss of renunciation. It is true that there are some things in the bhikkhu life that are difficult, but for me it's not the obvious things like lack of meals, not touching money, or celibacy, or the many other rules to follow. It is not even the fact that I live in one of the poorest countries in the world. Although the climate is something to endure, the

most difficult thing is to be mentally alone and not worrying about this or that, such as whether the water filters are still good, or about the bhikkhu who doesn't follow the rules, or the locals who are cutting down our trees for firewood. These can be overcome, and when that happens, the peace starts to settle in.

For me, the 227 rules are not so difficult to follow. I seem to take a refuge in these rules and enjoy reading the voluminous original ancient texts that explain the stories behind each one. These volumes also list stories about what seem like an additional several thousand minor rules. The stories can be quite funny. The one about masturbation is one of the most humorous and graphic rules. The ancient texts get quite explicit on the different ways someone can commit this offense. Some of the stories are left as a mystery because the translation committee refused to translate them into English.

There are 13 rules that will put one on probation if broken. The first rule covers masturbation, ahem, to completion. Here is how the system works. During a bhikkhu's probation, he must publicly announce probation offense(s) to all resident bhikkhus each night for at least six days. If he conceals his offense for X number of days,

then probation lasts for an additional X number of days. Although masturbation is the most common of the probation rules to break, the penalty does not happen often due to the social hardships imposed on both the resident bhikkhus and the offender, and the embarrassment it entails.

Things have changed at this monastery in the past two years. It now has a hospital, which is really just eight luxury rooms in one building. Even so, it does house the sick if there are any. We even have a health assistant who recently took robes and now watches over us until the volunteer doctor(s) come on Sundays. Meals are even more delicious and a lot more sanitary these days. All the servers wear gloves, aprons, and hats. Rumor has it that the cooks not only wash their hands with soap after they relieve themselves, but actually wear masks while they cook! Someone recently offered to change the water filters we have been using for the last two years, and boiled water is also provided. There is now a paved road leading to the lower and middle monasteries. There is a new person who helps the foreign bhikkhus and yogis get what they need from the local markets in addition to what is provided. If this person cannot get what is needed, another new

person has now arranged a special address for parcels that seems to work much better than the old address.

I have heard that Yahoo recently bought www.egroups.com and my stories are now listed on Yahoo's search list. Almost a year ago, I got an enthusiastic letter from a stranger that read, "Hi, you don't know who I am but I feel like I know all about you!" He apparently read all my stories, and after he finished graduate school, they convinced him to follow his dream to be a bhikkhu. I have not heard from him in a while, but I imagine that he is still at Wat Pa Nanachat. He now has a new name of Sāmaa era Ñanasanti. This means "A novice monk who knows peace." He has told me that one of his fellow novice monks read my stories too. It is a weird feeling knowing that many strangers are reading my life stories, but the feeling is positive too. I recently asked the moderator of this group to attempt to limit web access to members only, but to allow anyone to join. This way anyone can read my stories but they won't be strangers.

One person asked me what my name means. My name was an actual name during the time of the Buddha and is more like the names John or Mark than newer names. There is a funny story that goes with my name.

Immediately after my early morning novice ordination, I realized I had no name. “Sayadaw, I have no name!” I desperately told him as he was about to leave the room. He looked at me for a few moments and then asked if I preferred *mettā jhāna* (*samādhī* based on loving-kindness). I thought, “Wow! Mettā Jhāna! Surely, since I have just ordained, he knows I do not have the attainment of loving-kindness *samādhī*. He must be referring to my new name, but Mettā Jhāna is quite a heavy name to have. Nevertheless, I will accept whatever name he gives me.”

“That would be okay,” I answered with the sound of confusion in my voice. He knew I did not understand his question correctly, so he asked me again, and I replied in the same way. He then told me my new name. My teacher then explained that the original Venerable S. was most known for being "top-top" in *mettā jhāna samādhī*! I like my new name, and I hope I can live up to it.

I really love this life and I don't really see any other life for me. I am sort of like a fish out of water. I am one who has always swum against the stream, looking for a place where I can rest. One of my previous teachers loved the movie *The Big Blue*. (Learn more about this beautiful movie at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Big_Blue

It is the poetic story of a man who feels he is different from the rest of the world. He enjoys a different world, an underwater world that few can experience. I take that movie to heart and think of it often. I could write another funny list as I did in my Hawaii travel notes, and joke around some more, but I'm starting to slowly give that up for peace. I actually started to write some other funny stuff, but it just sounded like a humorous way of complaining. After all, a sense of humor is usually used to offset things one might complain about. There were many things I could have written about, but I have decided to leave this particular note simple and more beautiful than funny.

It is a big chore to sit in front of a computer to write one of these notes, but I figured I owed you all at least one last note. My computer died two rainy seasons ago, and I am down the mountain in the computer room in one of the newly built hospital rooms. Will this be the last note? I'm not totally sure, but I wouldn't expect many more to come too soon. I might later decide to write you more about the daily life, but I've already explained: Meditation is the primary schedule. Even so, who knows? One day I might get tired of "enjoying myself." As I said before, disrobing is statistically likely, but I'm quite happy with this life. I'm

about to pass the two-year mark, which starts to put the statistics a little more in my favor, but I'm still going against the odds and, poetically, against the stream.

You might recall that in 1996 I wrote many spiritual songs. It was a difficult time for me because I wanted to become a monk, but just couldn't get myself to do it, nor was I sufficiently educated as to which school of Buddhism would be best for me. I would have been a Tibetan or Vietnamese monk early on, but I never got pushed or pushed myself over the edge. Maybe things would be different if I had read someone else's travel notes! During that time, I decided that relationships and starting a family would be interesting to explore since most people find that the most fulfilling, as the movie *American Beauty* correctly points out. Shortly afterwards, I made a determination to fall in love, and I did. I told this woman that I would either marry her or become a monk. Since we never got married, and it did not last longer than six months, it may have seemed a come-on line to her. So now I'm a monk and true to what I had originally set out to do-- that is, to seek enlightenment. I remember another song I wrote back in 1996 about knowing that I would be able to find what I am looking for, but delays in the process could cause me to miss it. The song is called "Just One Thing."

I look at all the gurus, teachers, preachers, and
philosophers
That I've learned from.

I look at all the roads that I've walked across,
crawled across, and stumbled across
In this lifetime.

I find myself halfway down the road and it's getting

cold,

But I know I will get to find the place.

I know I will find the place, win the race, and I'll do
it at this pace,
In this lifetime.

I'm just trying to "Realize Myself,"
Trying to find the meaning of all of This.
And that is just one thing that I'm afraid I'll miss.
Just one thing that I'm afraid I'll miss.

– "Just One Thing," 1996, Me

One day I will reach my supreme goal, enlightenment, whatever that is. In the meantime, the next time you cook some noodles and throw a pot of water to boil on the stove, give it dash of salt and, most importantly, a dash of oil. As the water begins to heat up, and the oil slicks begin to swirl around and get closer and closer to each other, you might lend a delicate ear close to the pot. And if you listen very closely with intense concentration, you might be able to hear and see the sound of unification, true love, the infinite, joy, bliss, and the oneness-of-it-all: Two Ping One.\

May Peace shine brilliantly through you!

Bhikkhu S.

Monastery Note 5: Walkman Karaoke

January 1, 2004

I remember when I was living the so-called high class, successful life in the heart of Connecticut's Gold Coast, in Greenwich... I was a programmer then, and on weekends I would usually find myself somewhere walking along Greenwich Avenue. Many times on these sunny weekend days, I saw a mildly retarded man walking up and down the sidewalks with the headphones of his Walkman portable cassette player at full blast. He would sing just about as loud as the music playing in his ears. Singing louder and louder, he would approach me walking in the other direction. It was very annoying and quite out of place for Greenwich, but it was quite clear that he was mentally handicapped, judging by his behavior and facial features.

All in all, he was happy, singing and singing, not really caring about the world outside. He was in another world, a world that others could not hear. To him, the music mixed with his own voice sounded as sweet as honey. Maybe if we all could hear the music he was hearing, he might not sound so bad? He's not alone. We've all done this before at one time or another as youths, singing along with our

headphones, until we learned how funny it sounded to others. Maybe if he was in front of a karaoke setup, he might actually sound good! But he was alone in his own experience, immersed in the world of “Walkman Karaoke.”

So why would I talk about this? Why would I make it the theme for this letter abroad? He was like a performer who is the only one who can hear his voice together with the sing-along music. The performer might sound terrible to the audience. In the same way, I am inside this monastery and you are outside. I am the performer immersed in this monastic world, while all you know are words from these stories.

In other words, most of you probably don’t have any idea what Theravada Buddhism is, let alone what it is like to be a monk in this tradition. I realize this and wish to draw you deeper into the world that I perceive. Previously, in my notes to you, I was not much different than a Walkman karaoke performer. I now realize I must let you hear the music playing in my headphones. I need to give you a good look inside, let you in on some of the behind-the-scenes action, in order to help you understand it all – what I’m doing, why I’m here, and why I want to tell you all how great this place is.

Shortly before I left home, I started to think about what a great musician I would have become if I had not quit my piano lessons when I was ten years old. I was pretty good back then and wrote my first song after only one year of practice. For the life of me, I could not remember why I quit my lessons. When I asked my mother, she explained why. “Do you remember the song you wrote?” she asked, and I nodded yes. “Your brother told you he hated your song and you quit playing at that moment.” I try to remember my older brother’s critique and how it would have totally crushed me, broken my heart, and caused me not only to quit but go so far as repress that part of my life for more than twenty years. I will have to trust my mother, because I don’t remember my brother telling me he hated my song. It is, however, easy to *imagine* why he would tell me that.

You see, when I played that song, I would go into a trance, like some sort of meditative mind state. I can still somewhat remember how the song goes too! It had a few base notes swinging back and forth while I would gently play some of the notes two or three octaves above middle C. I think I sometimes played this song for long periods of time without stopping. It did not really have a beginning or an end. It was circular and lasted as long as I wanted it

to. The best thing about the song was the mood it put me into. I am sure I heard much sweeter notes than were actually coming out of the piano. To me it sounded wonderful and peaceful. However, maybe it was different for my captive audience, the residents of the house, and my brother in particular.

Have you ever heard Keith Jarrett play the first song on the Köln Concert CD? (The complete CD is at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_IW1wLZhzE).

When I first heard the first five or ten seconds it released something in me. I had to have the CD because I wanted more. It must have reminded me of that song I wrote in my early youth. The rest of the CD was cool, but it was really just the first seconds that did it for me. Listening to the whole CD, I could get the sense that he was in his own world while performing the two songs. (There are only two songs on the album.) The songs lasted long and flowed the way he wanted them to. Near the end, the songs build and he's literally kicking and screaming. He's a piano god, and the music sounded great as I remember it, but I wonder what it would really sound like if I was inside his head. Surely it would sound even more fantastic!

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not really comparing myself to Mr. Jarrett, the piano god. However, when I think of those first few notes, it reminds me of the feeling inside my head when I was playing. "Inside my head" is the key. I was once told that on the legendary lost continent of Atlantis composers and performers did not use instruments. Everyone in Atlantis was psychic, so the audience just went inside the composer's head! Since my brother is not psychic, I'm sure it sounded quite annoying to him, and I would have probably said the same thing if I were in his place!

As I have said, the main thing we do here is meditate. Most of us are full-time meditators, and each day calls for 8+ hours of sitting meditation. There is no way for you to go inside my head. Everyone has different experiences, and I cannot describe mine in such a way that you would possibly experience it. In the last note, I explained the meditation technique and how wonderful it can make one can feel. It is important for you to understand that our main job is to meditate all day long. It is the main reason for sure why I'm very happy here. Every other monastery I visited seemed to have schedules. I don't like schedules and structured living. The fact that I wrote my own song on the piano at an early age may have been indicative of

my quest to do my own thing. My father tells me I have always marched to a different drumbeat.

So what can I tell you to let you into my world? There is much to tell you.

There are three seasons in Burma: hot, cold, and rainy season. Overall, the weather is all the same: HOT! Cold season means that the evenings get down to the chilly high 60's... burr... while the rest of the day is hot. The leaves start to fall during cold season and after a few months, hot season arrives. Hot season is really hot! Eventually the moisture starts to build up until the first rains come in the middle of May. It basically does not rain at all during the hot and cold seasons. About two weeks after the first rain, it rains just about every day until the end of the official three-month Buddhist Rainy Season, sometime around October or November. Then it all starts all over again with the cold season.

Luckily, rainy season is my favorite. I love all *five* months of it. It is the perfect temperature – not too hot, not too cold. It's quiet, and the noises around me get drowned out by the rain striking the metal corrugated roofing. We had over 350 bhikkhus and a total of more than 600 residents this past rainy season. Nearly everyone has the same

brown or silver umbrella. Surprisingly, until last rainy season, everyone sort of knew which was theirs just by the markings. Some put string on the handle, while others might have some tape along the fabric to stop the leaks. This past season gave us a little too much confusion, and we now have laminated umbrella name tags in addition to the markings. One time when someone took my umbrella, I replaced it with a communal umbrella, and the next day someone took that one too! Later on, I recovered my lost/taken umbrellas. If you don't have an umbrella during rainy season, you are in big trouble.

Umbrellas surely break, and we now have an umbrella repair service station at ku2 i #1. I call the monk in charge of this "U THEE," which means "Venerable Umbrella." You can actually use "I'm sorry I was late, my umbrella was in the shop" as an excuse in this monastery. With this umbrella service, I was able to make my umbrella last almost two rainy seasons before giving it away to a visiting monk. Umbrellas really take a beating here, and my umbrella was in the shop three times!

U Thee is a real pro. He can do anything with your umbrella, and there are plenty of parts available from the umbrella graveyard. Once, someone donated several high-

tech umbrellas from Brookstone, a nifty gadget store in the States. It has two umbrellas in one: an upper deck and a lower deck. It's like an umbrella with a rain fly. My teacher was given one and soon many of the reconditioned umbrellas started to appear in the same style. Sometimes the simple life can get high-tech too.

And so it is the simple life that I live. It allows me to appreciate the small things which would normally get lost in the day-to-day schedules of my previous way of life, which was simpler than most. Phish has a song called "SIMPLE" in which they brag, "We've got it simple in the band." I used to be so envious of them. All they had to do was play music and people would love them for it. It surely was simple, and they enjoyed what they did. Hmmm.... Now I can sing my favorite song, "I've got it simple in the monastery!" You don't even need to hear the music in my headphones to realize this.

I remember telling my grandfather that I wanted to become a monk and to beg for food. I guess I could have chosen better words, and he was not in the mood for my telling him something like that while he was lying on a hospital bed in the cancer ward. I hope I can clarify this a little bit more. First, Buddhist rules do not allow bhikkhus

to eat food that has been stored overnight. This rule was created to require bhikkhus to collect their food daily from the lay community. This dependence not only increases faith among the lay people but also keeps the bhikkhus in line. If the bhikkhus are not worthy of gifts, hospitality, offerings, and respect, they will go hungry. Well, that's the idea, anyhow. So yes, bhikkhus traditionally collect their food door to door or at a village center. It is done that way in many Buddhist countries, and even in some countries that are not so Buddhist. But it is not begging. If I were actually to go door to door (which might be the case were I in America), I would not be allowed to ring the doorbell or knock. I would just have to stand there for a few minutes with my eyes cast down. If someone actually noticed I was there, I would not really be able to say anything (unless they asked something). Also, I would keep my alms bowl slightly hidden and never look the potential donors in the eyes. They would figure things out quickly and tell me to leave or hopefully drop a bit of food into my bowl. Then I would go to the next house, etc. So it is not begging, but luckily I'm not in America. In other places, like Thailand, the donors eagerly wait on the road for the bhikkhus to come!! At this monastery it is even easier. We collect our

food from the donors at our alms food hall! “We’ve got it simple in the monastery!”

There is much to say about the food. Usually one individual or group sponsors each day for the main course, while other individuals sponsor the additional tasty treats and fruits. Because most servers appear to have been coached by my grandmother on portion control, we often receive more food than we can possibly fit into our stomachs. Nevertheless, I find that the oversize portions fit well in my heart. Because we get too much food, several of us end up playing this switcheroo game with other monks. The name of the game is to get rid of all the extra stuff you can’t possibly eat without having someone place more food in your bowl at the same time. I usually lose at this game, and I think that is the real reason why I’m fat. Not enough fruit used to be a problem, but things have changed in the past few months and now we get plenty.

I believe I recently sent you all some pictures. One of them, called “Looking Out,” was taken from the meditation hall balcony where I peacefully eat alone. As you might be able to see, it is really beautiful where I eat. I look out at the same place every day at nearly the same

time, and it makes me think of the movie *Smoke*. It has a beautiful scene where the smoke shop owner shows William Hurt his life's work-- a collection of photographs taken every day of the view of the street corner right outside the entrance of his shop. He would take the same shot at the same time every day, at 8:00 a.m, I think.

So he shows Hurt stacks of photo albums that record this one photographic viewpoint over and over again. After William Hurt looks at a few pages, he says, "They're all the same." Then he quickly flicks through more and more pages in disbelief that someone would actually take pride in such a project. When the photographer sees Hurt's reaction, he tells him he's looking at the pictures all wrong. He says one needs to slow down and look at the differences in the natural light, or at the different people, their expressions, or just the weather. Some people walk by in a rush to get to work, while others seem to be taking their time. Sometimes it is raining or snowing, while other times it is just a clear morning day. It is a great scene and... hmmm... it makes you kinda stop and breathe for a while as the film slowly flips through the different pictures. I'm pretty sure William Hurt didn't have a script for that scene. (This scene can be viewed at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGV_h36uZ5E)).

I remember that scene often as I look out upon the panoramic view in the morning. I usually arrive at the meditation hall a little after 6:00 a.m. The first light has only been around for a little while, and the pastel colors start to mix with the low-flying clouds. As I eat my breakfast the scenery begins to make itself clearer and sharper. It is almost like watching a Polaroid picture come into view. Every day is different –sometimes they seem the same, but they are all different. It is not rare that I look out onto the horizon and see the beauty that surrounds me. It causes me to think about the bhikkhu life and say to myself, “Ummmm, I’m so lucky to be here!”

Sometimes it reminds me of Mosha, the barefoot rabbi in Kauai. Mosha is a strange character. If there was a cartoon depicting a barefoot rabbi/hippie, he would be it. Rumor has it that he was an orthopedic surgeon at Harvard Medical School in the 60’s. And... guess who was in the vicinity at that time? Yes, Timothy Leary and Ram Dass. I’m not sure what the real story was, but he’s been on the island for a while and has some land with only a tent and a trampoline. That’s where he lives, that’s what he does! Many times he would conduct a Hawaiian-style Sabbath on Friday nights. Sometimes it was at Anini Beach and other times at Secret Beach. Every now and then I would

bake some bread, and we would pass it around with Sabbath wine served in a coconut shell. He once gave a little bit of a sermon as he swigged from the cheap red wine bottle. “Clergy privileges,” he said. That night he talked about spirituality and this whole bit about keeping life simple for one day per week. He said that being spiritual is to literally stop and smell the flowers or see the natural beauty that surrounds you. In Kauai that is very easy to do. I think of this cartoon-like rabbi sometimes as I walk on the forest path or while I simply eat my *mohengha*, the most delicious Burmese noodle breakfast!

In 1988, not long after I started thinking about exploring the spiritual world, I wrote a song called “Utopian Avenue.”

I see a lot of people walking and talking
Down the street with smiles on their face.
And I know that if I keep on going
I will soon be at that place.

Because, don't you know
That I'm going to
Utopian Avenue.

Throw away all of your jackets and raincoats,
It's warm and never rains out there.

But there is always plenty of water.

Where it comes from I don't care...Because, don't
you
know...

There is no need for any weapons,
You might as well leave them behind.

There is no one to be afraid of,
Because everyone is so kind. Because, don't you
know...

Throw away all of your money,
Everything is good and always for free.
You might not get everything you want,
But you'll surely get what you need.

Because, don't you know
That I'm going to,
Utopian Avenue.

I think of this song often, and sometimes I laugh to myself
and say, "I found it! I found it!!" Not bad for a prophetic
song, eh? Shortly after I ordained, road construction
started for connecting the lower and upper monasteries.

As a kid I used to have many dreams about the way I
wanted to live my life. You already know the story about
running off a cliff with a hang glider after putting a stick of

gum in my mouth. It's too bad I didn't have the gum in New Zealand! Another dream was to live in a commune. I once saw a TV documentary about communes in America. I think there was one community that made hammocks, or was it soap? The Amish have something going too. The Jews have kibbutzes in Israel, and there are the folks at Island Pond, Vermont who follow the Grateful Dead, and now Phish are looking for more commune converts. One problem for me was the important role religion plays in most communes. However, now that I'm a Buddhist, religion doesn't seem like much of a problem anymore, and it is actually a plus. Of the many rules in Buddhism, many deal with communal harmony – communal living and its structure. It is really wonderful that I get to live in a community designed by the Buddha himself! Sometimes I feel so lucky to be in a place that really flows well. My teacher has really done a lot to make this place comfortable, and I'm very grateful for that.

My teacher has made sure this monastery encourages us to follow the Buddhist monastic code (of rules) very closely. This way of life creates a caring family that looks after one another, while others handle the worrisome responsibilities. It also protects us from the harsh anxieties of life and allows us the opportunity to return to the

innocence and simplicity of a six-year-old. So I actually get to be a kid again while living out a childhood dream!

I'm not sure how this age regression happens, but it does. It sort of comes with the ordination. It is really cool to be a six-year-old again too! I think that being moneyless and having lots of time on your hands has a lot to do with this feeling. Being moneyless is surely the kicker. You see, if I need something, I have to ask someone for it. In the spirit of "not being pesky beggars," monks must ask for things only from specially designated people. These donors share in the role of a parent. Likewise, it puts me in the childlike role.

In addition to meditating all day long, we can get a chance to learn Pāḷi, the language of the Buddhist scriptures. We can learn the scriptures, some chants, and the grammar and vocabulary of the language too. It is all as we choose, and since there are no schedules here, everything is usually self-taught. Nevertheless, it makes me feel like I'm at school again.

I've recently decided to learn the Burmese language a little at a time. It is lots of fun with my new patented method. You see, I point at an object and ask, "What is this?" in Burmese. Everyone will joyfully oblige with the Burmese

word. In fact, some people come up to me with different objects in their hands and point to them and say, “T—O—Y,” in Burmese while I try to imitate what they are saying. It is not easy to speak Burmese correctly, so it takes a few times, just as it would for a child. The best part is when I get the pronunciation close enough. They will smile and say like parent, “V-E-R-Y G-O-O-D!”

I’m sure if it were appropriate they would pinch my cheek too! Since the sounds are impossible to mimic on the spot, I’ve taken on the task of learning the *kaji khagway*, or Burmese ABC’s. What is the best way to learn the ABC’s? With a children’s primary school book of course! I used to think how easy and natural it is for children to learn a language, but after some careful thought, I realized it takes a child a long time. It is not so much more difficult for an adult to learn if one takes the same amount of time. In addition, the positive feedback one gets as a child is a real aid to learning. Learning Burmese a little bit at a time is the secret to having fun and (hopefully) success. I’m not sure I’ll be successful, but I can communicate a little bit in “Tarzan speak” now, and I’m having a heck of a lot of fun doing it too!

Another quality that can return one to the innocence and simplicity of a six-year-old is the relationship between the teacher and pupil. It is similar to a father-and-son relationship, and that is well documented in the ancient Buddhist scriptures. My teacher, Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw, is the biggest father of them all. As a father/teacher, he must provide me with what I need. Likewise, as his son/student, I must ask him for permission to do anything outside the normal schedule, and some things within the schedule too. That is why they call this relationship “dependent.” Traditionally, it is part of the training for the first five years as a bhikkhu. I am very grateful to have him as my teacher. He is really a wonderful person and is well noted for his qualities of loving-kindness and compassion. If there is anything wrong, I can go to his kur i at any time. I also see him daily for meditation interviews. It’s sort of weird how my relationship with him is. You see, he’s a real big shot in Burma, yet I can go to his ku□ i and tell him anything that seems important that might in fact be trivial. For a meditator everything is important, and he is very compassionate about that.

The quality of food and water is quite good these days. Due to the squeaky clean sanitary conditions (by Burmese

standards) and three new reverse-osmosis drinking water stations, frequent monastery-wide food problems seem a thing of the past. I find it hard to believe that I actually drank directly from the water tap back home! I'm sad to say, though, that I've gained more weight! There are very few people who actually gain weight here, and I'm surely one of them. I'm not sure how I do it, and others who lose lots of weight are baffled by it. I think it has something to do with the yummy greasy, oily, salty food they serve. Once you become acclimated, it literally grows on you!

Some people get sick, though. I'm not sure why. One bhikkhu who has been here for roughly five years frequently gets sick, while one of the German bhikkhus (the one I smiled at while washing my bowl) seems always healthy. After Sayadaw's trip to San Francisco, there were six Americans who were impressed enough to actually come here and ordain. The two who had long-term plans were sick a great deal of the time. One of them, who was my friend, decided to leave for medical reasons. Before he came, he ate some crazy food on a Thai safari trip. He got worms and freaked out when the illness became painful and blood started to appear. He went home soon after.

When there are unexplained sicknesses, there are some outlandish remedies too. Urine therapy is very common among the foreign bhikkhus. I didn't learn about this until I hit the monastery scene in California. Venerable 4 añhissaro Bhikkhu told me that the mid-stream morning stuff is the best for one's health because it has melatonin in it. Likewise, Wat Pa Nanachat has two urine therapy books in its overstuffed library. The original book is called *The Water of Life*, while the more modern and updated version is called *The Golden Fountain*. If I were to name a book on urine therapy, I would call it *Drink Your“Self” to Health!* but drinking is only half the fun!

I once overheard a bhikkhu tell a urine therapy story. He explained that he had this terrible blocked nose while he was doing a retreat at the main Goenka center in India. Time was running out, and he had come a long way to do this retreat. A local suggested that he should try snorting some urine up his nose. Since he was in a desperate state, he gave it a shot, or a snort. Lo and behold, by the second snorting session, he was cured! He instantly became a convert!

If you want to be beautiful, you can take 8-day-old urine and rub it all over your body. It is especially effective on

your face. According to the book, this is the secret Hollywood fountain of youth! The prescription says that after you finish rubbing this fermented urine on your body or face, you should not rinse. Instead, a small amount of skin cream will supposedly take care of the smell. There is actually one person who has been doing this treatment for almost a year, and I must admit, his face does look fifteen years younger! He claims that his beard is no longer growing in gray and... hmmm... I believe him too.

As bhikkhus, we are told on our ordination day that our only medicine is bull urine! From time to time, there are these big jugs left at the bottom of the monastery mountain waiting to be carried up to my teacher's ku□ i Can you guess what the jugs are filled with? They take their bitter medicinal fruits, dry them in the sun, and then SOAK THEM IN BULL URINE FOR THREE MONTHS! Afterwards they dry them in the sun again. It sounds a lot worse than it actually is. I ate many of these dried and soaked fruits for almost three years before I knew about the process! They are supposed to be very good for you. The locals and now I too call these fruits “monk chocolate”!

Urine therapy is not the only unorthodox remedy. One day when I saw my American friend at the meditation hall, he

said to me, “Would you like to see the results of my liver cleanse?” On hearing that ridiculous statement, I let out my old belly laugh and cried, “You’ve got to be kidding me!” Oh yes! He was really serious and had a jar in his shoulder bag too! His hand was already in the bag and ready to pull it out. He was as proud as ever with the results.

Most of you are probably not familiar with the liver cleanse technique. The first time I had heard about this was when I was volunteering in the kitchen of an American Goenka center, not long before I first left home. A fellow kitchen worker told a story about how he did some type of fast and then DRANK FOUR CUPS OF OLIVE OIL! He said that the first two cups were easy, but the second two were really difficult to get down the hatch. I was in tears laughing in disbelief at this story. But wait, there’s more! The Result! Most people who do this “cleanse” get “THE RESULT.” “The Result” consists of several green balls that come out of your liver or gall bladder, depending on what type of cleanse you believe you are doing. He said he was so amazed at what had come out of him after the four cups of olive oil that he scooped ’em out of the toilet and put them in a jar for about a week or two. He said he would stare at these balls

in disbelief that they had actually been inside of him. He would show all his friends too.

I asked my friend if people actually took him up on his viewing offer. He gave me a look and said in a soft, discreet, “you don’t understand” tone of voice, “If you’re in the club, you’ll want to see them.” Yes, there is certainly a club of Liver Cleansers floating around this monastery. I actually did one myself not long after I first arrived. Someone in Hong Kong gave me an instruction sheet. You don’t have to drink four cups of olive oil to get “The Result.” About a half cup mixed with fruit juice and sugar will do the trick. Nevertheless, I got sick from drinking regular cooking oil instead of olive oil. When I told my friend that I had once tried a cleanse but gotten sick, he told me in his lowered voice that it is common for first timers to get sick.

After all the talk about “The Results” and the other remedy stories, you might wonder about the theme of “Walkman karaoke,” and my objective to explain to you how beautiful it is inside the headphones. It is not easy to get inside, though. Reading my words too fast the same way William Hurt originally looked at photographs is very easy to do.

When it all looks the same, you've got to stop and take a closer look.

To see the inside is to know the feeling. Experienced "club members," unlike myself, are very grateful for finding this cleanse technique. They may feel cleaner and healthier and believe that others will benefit from a cleanse as well. So they are not only proud of the results, but want to share their experience with the world. In this case, it is in the form of a jar containing "The Results." But we must understand, myself included, that "The Result" is just the external viewpoint of the "Walkman karaoke" performer, while the inside view is the experience of feeling clean, healthier, and relieved that these "things" were expelled from the body. In other words, the experience should not be judged by its cover.

This can be compared to the bhikkhu life I live. Being celibate, free from money, and appearing as if we have thrown our lives away are the *outward* appearances. The view from the *inside* consists of the simple, pure, and free feelings associated with the experience of being a bhikkhu.

Speaking about throwing away one's life, I do not believe I ever told you how I got the nerve to quit my job and start this whole way of life in the first place. I was working as a

software consultant at Bayer Diagnostics (the aspirin company). The blood analyzer I had worked on for nearly three years was headed for multi-species blood testing, called “Phase II.” A fellow vegetarian at work was upset and I asked her why. She told me the machine would be used for laboratory animal testing. At first, I thought that the multi-species project would be mostly for veterinarian use, until I asked a co-worker who previously worked in an animal laboratory. He confirmed the vegetarian’s words with the question, “Do you think someone is going to take their pet rat to the vet because it’s not feeling well?” To paint a better picture, he described how they fill up a test tube with the blood of a tiny little mouse. He held up his fingers to illustrate and said, “A mouse is this big and a test tube is this big. How do you fill up a test tube with blood from such a small little mouse?” He paused for a moment, and then, with a “wake up and smell the coffee” type of smile, he said, “You cut off the tail and squeeEEEEeze it.” A cute mouse, among other animals, was on the new CD label. Hmm... I had to leave, and I bought an air ticket to prove it. I eventually phased myself out of the project months later, saw the world, and headed for the bhikkhu life at Wat Pa Nanachat.

A few people have asked why I left Wat Pa Nanachat (WPN). It goes like this. After a while, it became evident that I was not happy at that monastery, so the abbot asked to see me to find out what was going on. When he asked me what was bothering me, I told him that my dream monastery didn't exist and that this monastery was the best I could find. He then asked me to describe my dream monastery. I told him that my dream monastery would have a ku, i on top of a mountain where I could sit and meditate all day long. I would only leave to get my food or see my meditation master. When I had a new experience during my meditation, I would go to my teacher's ku□ i and say, "Master, Master, I had this experience today!" My master would then say, "Continue in that way or continue as before." Then I would go back up to my ku2 i with my new instructions. After I explained this, the abbot said, "Well there is one place..." and went on to describe Pa-Auk Meditation Centre. I'm really grateful that he said those words. Wow. Things are a lot different here than they would have been at WPN.

So... here I am, inside the world of Bhikkhu S.! I once had a visitor from America. He turned on his video camera and asked me the David Byrne question, "Well, how did you get here?" So I proceeded to tell him the story about how I

first got turned on to meditation, how I decided to leave my job, the watch story, the Sai Baba slipper story, WPN, and of course the ordination story. I completed the 30-minute saga with the phrase, “So... Here I am Bhikkhu S.!” while stroking my robes. I then thought about how I would explain the different adventures I’ve had and all the exciting things I’ve done, and then say that this experience has surely been the best. I then started to say, “You know... I’ve done a lot of...” but something happened at that moment. A big lump formed in my throat and I felt my eyes start to well up. I couldn’t go on much longer. I cut everything short and finished abruptly in a quivering voice, “But this has made me the most happy!” Tears were falling down my face and I couldn’t speak any more. I couldn’t even tell the person filming me to stop. I could only wave my hand and give some director sign language for “cut” to tell him to stop.

Well... once again, here I am, and I’m really happy I’ve made it this far. It is hard to believe I left home over four years ago! Because of the dropout rate, I cannot be completely sure how long my life as a bhikkhu is going to last. However, it looks like I’m here for the long haul.

So one day you might find yourself on the sidewalks of Greenwich Avenue listening to our friend the “Walkman karaoke” performer. He will be singing as loud as he can, and surely, as you now know, he hears a different tune than you. All in all, you might not fully get the message, even after reading this note. You might think, “He had so much and has thrown it all away. He’s now just an empty shell cast off along the distant shores of Hawaii.” Well, I’m not sure what more I can say or do. But one day, maybe, when you are on vacation and walking along a Hawaii beach, you might find my empty shell, and if you pick it up, and hold it to your ear... or to your heart... you might be able to hear my song.

May the simple sounds of peaceful silence enter your headphones!

Bhikkhu S.

November 30, 2006

Greetings...

A few weeks ago, a few people came to our monastery I have not seen in a long time. They wanted to know about my trip to America and I told them, but repeating myself was tiresome. So I decided to face the situation, sit down, and write another note to everyone else. After all, it has been about three years since my last!

Buddha Note: “The Return”

It sounds like a good name for a movie, doesn't it? “The Return.” It could be the title of some kind of space movie, like *Contact* or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I wonder what that guy who flew away would look like after all these years? According to Einstein's theory, he'd probably look only a few hours older. Perhaps it could be a movie about a trip to the customer service desk at Walmart or maybe, just maybe, about a person who left home some seven years ago and decided to return back home for a short visit. Hmm... maybe that would be the topic. Another title coming to mind is “Return to America,” but that sounds too much like a sequel to *Seven Years in Tibet*. “Seven Years in Myanmar” also came to

mind, but I've only got five years here. So without further ado here is "The Return."

Hello! That's how they say "hello" in America!

I've long wondered when I would eventually say this! It is strange, because I never thought I would come back and *visit* my own country *as a foreigner*. Nevertheless, that is what happens when you come back as a monk, complete with a shaved head, robes, and a completely new way of life.

So... during May and June I visited America for five weeks. It was interesting to see it for the first time in nearly seven years, but I'm certainly happy to be back in Myanmar now. It was even more interesting to see some of my family and friends during my stay.

As in most of my travels, getting to my destination was not an easy task. The story goes like this....

A long, long time ago, in a far, far away place, I promised that I would one day return to the United States after I had finished my initial five-year training period. Surprisingly, this time approached very quickly. The visitation process started in August 2005 with a visit from my brother who arranged a telephone call with my parents. During the call, I hinted that I would come back to America for a visit, but

there was one *caveat*: I would need my parents to sponsor another monk to come with me to make me feel more secure. Although they said they would do whatever it took to see me, they did not fully realize that if I came I would not come alone.

In December 2005, I needed to start thinking about whom I would ask to go with me. I first had in mind an Indian monk who held an American passport, but that fell through since he had not yet finished his initial five years of monastic training. Other choices also fell through, and I was left with my last choice, a Myanmar monk named Ashin Paññānanda. He was my friend, but he was my last choice because I knew there would be many difficulties getting him an American visa. Nevertheless, with the choices narrowed down to one, we started the paperwork process in January for a trip planned in May.

In America it is very easy to get a passport. You just fill out a form, pay the money, and – presto! – six weeks later, a passport arrives. In Myanmar, there is a big to-do about getting a passport because it takes at least three months for all the approval signatures to come together. Some people wait six months, while others are not approved at all!

The very first step was to get my father's sponsorship letter officially stamped by the Myanmar Embassy in Washington, D.C. One of the biggest problems was that most international travel sponsorships for monks come from religious or non-profit organizations. This sponsorship was from my father and only my father. At first, the embassy was very suspicious, but we knew someone who knew someone who was working there. It was difficult to explain to the embassy that the only purpose for my monastic friend to go was to "hold my hand." He would be my monastic companion in the strange land of America. Instead of making up a more acceptable reason or asking a monastery in America to write a sponsorship letter, we told the truth. The truth worked. So, step one was finally finished after a few months, but that was just the stamp on the sponsorship letter!

There were many other stamps and signatures to obtain from officials in Myanmar. To make things even more difficult, in the middle of the process, the government moved most of its officials to a town called Pyinmna (also known as Naypyidaw. Civilians were not allowed to visit this town, so getting the proper signatures was a little tricky! Luckily, I picked the right Myanmar monk to come

with me. It turned out that Ashin Paññānanda's father had published an autobiography and was quite famous in his town, which is near Pyinmana. Coincidentally, one of the officials at the immigration office had recently read the book and offered to help. It was quite a long process, and I think some of the rules were bent in order to get the passport, but finally at the end of March it came through. You should see what a Myanmar passport looks like! The name, passport number, etc. are all written by hand! Nevertheless, it was the real thing.

Next came the difficult part: U.S.A. visa approval.

To get an American visa you need an interview at the U.S. embassy. There are no guarantees you will be approved, and it costs a hundred non-refundable smackers to find this out. Then of course there is the visa fee if they actually say yes. So, we had an appointment at the embassy, and in the end, based on the questions they asked, Ashin Paññānanda was refused entry because he spoke English too well, was educated with a medical degree, and had only five years under his belt as a monk. Because of all that they felt he might get a job and stay illegally in America. I emailed my family with the bad news and said how sorry I

was not to be able to make a trip this year. What do you think their reaction was?

I did say in my “Maybe-Next-Year” letter that there was a small chance of getting approved by re-applying and shelling out another \$100 for a second interview. If my parents were willing to sponsor another interview, I was ready to try again. They urged me to give it another shot.

The previous year I had experienced another immigration failure. I carefully studied the type of questions asked, and noticed a pattern in the two failed cases. I figured that if a pattern could be seen, a strategy could be developed! When they refused Ashin Paññānanda they gave him a paper explaining that under such and such law and section number, all visa applicants are assumed not eligible until proven otherwise. However, the only questions asked were the ones that would never demonstrate he was worthy of approval. They did not need to ask any of the questions they asked, since all the information was already on the application. It appeared as though they would ask questions for the purpose of making a case for rejection based upon the applicant’s verbal answers. It was a psychological game to make the refusal seem acceptable to the rejected applicant.

I figured that if the new answers he gave in the second interview were not sufficient for a rejection, then maybe they would not reject him. I typed a long letter defending the answer to each question they previously asked, and to some other possible new ones too. If the official read the document within the three-week review period, he would see Ashin Paññānanda as a worthy applicant. If the official did not read the document, then he did not do his \$100 job properly! I figured the official would probably never read it, so I coached my monastic friend to reference my document in his answers.

The interview began and the embassy official asked the same useless questions as expected. After Ashin Paññānanda answered the second question and referenced my letter for the second time, the embassy official said, “I think I’d better read this document.” The strategy worked. The document had a reasonable enough defense to throw out the previous questions. Afterwards, the whole vibe changed, and then the official asked a question about the relationship between Ashin Paññānanda and his father. This was a question that led to a visa approval! Eventually, the official said, “We don’t normally do this, but....”

On May 18th, I woke up my parents with a phone call to tell them the good news. They were very happy and I was much relieved that I would be able to make good on my promise to visit the States.

We would leave in four days.

The day I arrived was very busy. I took a direct flight from Bangkok to New York, starting at 5:00 p.m. and ending at 7:00 a.m. the next day. If you figure in the 10.5-hour time difference, that's a lot of hours. I did not get any sleep on the plane, but when I arrived I was filled with energy.

Seeing my mother and father for the first time in nearly seven years was a little emotional. My mother looked slightly different from the last time I'd seen her, but all in all, she was still the same. My father looked pretty much the same as I remembered him from seven years before. *A great deal of time had passed, and seeing my parents brought this point to the forefront of my mind.* I said to my mother, "It's been a long time." She agreed, repeating those words with a trembling voice. As she spoke, my eyes started to well up and hers did the same. I wondered what they thought of me. When I left home, I was 28 years old and I wore normal clothes. At the airport, I was 35 years

old and wearing a red bed sheet that was all patched together!

I had flown halfway around the world on a trip totaling well over twenty hours, and we were now only two hours away from our new home. We quickly departed and worked our way to Connecticut. My father told me that we would pass by Greenwich and asked if I wanted to stop anywhere along the way. Since we were on the home stretch, I decided to see my old yoga teacher on Greenwich Avenue, the home of the Walkman karaoke performer.

The car pulled to a stop and there was a small moment of truth as I took my first steps outside. I must admit I did feel a little out of place. Perhaps I would be a freak show for the locals? A Walkman karaoke performer might have been more commonplace than two monks walking along Greenwich Avenue. However, after a few more steps, I figured that a monk was who I was and that was all I could be. I would have to deal with it. Things seemed more natural and at ease at that point, *but I did not totally lose sight of where I was and what I looked like*. In the end, I descended the stairs to give a quick hello to my old yoga teacher.

This event was humorous because we arrived about a half an hour after the class began, and my yoga teacher normally does not allow latecomers. Knowing this, I tapped on the glass door anyways instead of waiting for the class to end. She was quick to wave me away... but then did a double take... and probably thought, “Did I just tell a monk to beat it?” Then something clicked and she knew who I was. On the second take of her double take, her mouth silently slow-motioned the word “Jeremy.”

She immediately came out of the studio and gave her patented enthusiastic warm welcome. The funny part was that students need to hold a posture (often while balancing on one leg) until the teacher tells them to do the next move. Instead, the teacher was talking to me while some of her students were about to wobble over! She’s a real pro, and every so often would peep her head into the studio and say, “Release...and now the other side.” Then we would continue our conversation as before.

It was a wonderful way to start the trip. With no sleep on the plane, I really needed one hell of a cup of coffee, and that certainly did the trick! My parents were also happy because they did not know how others would react to my appearance. It turned out that the local community was

either interested or not really fazed by us. My parents had expected something like airborne stones coming our way. The real reaction seemed to set my parents' minds at ease during the rest of the trip.

We decided to take a small detour to visit my sister. Since my fellow monk and I needed to be finished with our one meal for the day before noon, getting our meal put everything else on the back burner. My parents took us to the Good Ol' American Breakfast Shop in my sister's hometown. If you remember, I like to write about food. Omelets, oatmeal, bagels, wraps! Even real coffee with real cream! Wow! OK, that's enough... it's just everyday stuff for you anyway. Afterwards, we went to visit my sister.

It had been a long time since seeing my sister as well. She met a new person while I was away, and was married for over five years with a recently adopted child. My missing these events in her life did not make her very happy, but I say better late than never. Her husband also stopped by from work, and we spoke for a little while before I was off to see my grandmother. It was my grandmother I was most interested in seeing. She is looking a little older these days. As you might remember, my grandfather died

somewhere between Fiji and my emergency transit to New Zealand.

When I was a child, I used to brag about how young my grandparents were, but now my grandmother is getting older. She is eighty-four, and over the past few years has had a series of health problems. She has also fallen a few times, and the last time her hip broke. That has taken a big toll on her, and she has moved from her active retirement community in Florida to an assisted living facility not far from my parents' house.

I was warned about all this before I saw her. I had speculated about what she would look and act like, but when I saw her, I could tell right away that her mind was still working right, and that was what mattered the most to me. So she walks a little bit slower and with a walker. To see a person is to connect with their mind. Don't you agree? Being able to 'see' my grandmother in good spirits with a clear mind removed my incorrect speculations. She recently had another birthday and I hope she has many more to come.

It was really nice to see her. She is so sweet. She did not seem to mind so much about the robes, but like my mother and sister, she wanted to hold, hug, and kiss me as

before. As a monk, we do not do this, not even with family, and everybody was briefed about it beforehand. This was the most difficult thing for my family to accept. It really upset my mother, but she knew it all along and accepted it as part of my new life.

Finally, after all the different visits, we were off to my grandmother's empty beach house in Niantic, CT. This was a place I had spent many o' days in the summers of my youth. It is a quaint little town with a wonderful small little beach community... and a nuclear power plant across the bay! This is where I get my glowing personality! It is not as bad as it sounds, and hey, the water is a few degrees warmer too! (I'm serious about that!)

There was only one problem with Niantic. Connecticut was a little too cold for my Burmese blood. I had planned the trip for May because I remembered it as neither too hot nor too cold, perhaps the perfect weather. I remember telling Ashin Paññānanda not to worry about the weather. OOPS! I now sympathize with the elderly women I used to see long ago, wearing full-length down coats in the middle of the summer. This was because most came from Florida, which has a climate similar to Myanmar. Myanmar is a really hot country, and we had left during the end of

hottest season. I was hardly acclimated to seemingly near-freezing temperatures all the way down in the 60's! I was fureeezing! Luckily, my Floridian grandmother sympathized with me and told me to turn on the heat... YES!!! Now wasn't that a warm thing to say?

My parents were a little worried about the beach house arrangement since it was about one hour from where they lived. We were alone, and since as monks we do not touch money or store food, we had to work out how we would eat every day. We would need to either collect our food or have it brought to us daily. Fortunately, I had already worked this out in my mind,

The plan was quite simple. There was a supermarket called Colonial Market about a mile from the beach house. My father would arrange that we could get our food via an "account." Since we are not allowed to touch the food until it is properly given to us, a store worker would be needed to help us obtain our food. The plan worked, and it turned out that the store had accounts for people who could not afford their meals. Nothing about the arrangement was really new to the management team at Colonial Market, and my parents were relieved.

Before we settled into the beach house, my father needed to prime up our account at the Market. While he was arranging everything, a man named Joey who worked in the dairy section asked sincerely, “What tribe are you from?” I explained that we were Buddhist monks from Myanmar and would be visiting for a short time. I also explained that my father was making arrangements for us to get our food since we cannot touch money or store food. While Joey had seen “arrangements” for other people, he had never seen anything like this before! Later he approached me again and asked, “Now let me get this straight. You don’t touch money? And you don’t touch women either?” After I confirmed this, he said, “That’s my life!” and slapped his forehead in disbelief.

After everything was arranged at the market, we finally arrived at our new American home, where we planned to stay for the next four weeks, which later got extended to five. Ahh... Now I can get some rest. I had not slept on the plane and I was awake for the whole day after. I was surely burned out, and my eyes were not only glowing from all the excitement, but glowing red from lack of sleep!

The plan with the food was an interesting one. In addition to visiting my family, I wanted to do a small experiment or

pilot test with Buddhism in America. You see, the monasteries I had previously considered ordaining at were very large and required lots of work and superstructure. It was not only a burden for the donors, but a burden for the monks who have to look after everything.

I wanted to see if the monastic lifestyle could be done on a small scale. Why do we need hundreds of acres in the middle of nowhere? Nearly anywhere in an American residential town is a super silent place compared to Asia! I thought that if we could find a small place to stay, then maybe we could get our food in the traditional monastic way with almost no costs to keep us going. Perhaps it would be possible to survive if I ever wanted to live in America for an extended time. Five weeks was surely not long enough to answer this question. However, going for alms food was part of this experiment, and it would definitely give me a feel for possible longer visits in the future.

The plan was to walk around the town as we would in Southeast Asia. If we did not get any food, we had Colonial Market as a backup. Being realistic, we figured that we would need our backup plan nearly every day. We were not in Myanmar or Thailand, and nobody would know

what we were doing. As monks, informing the locals about our intentions to collect food is not proper unless they ask us first. Eventually, they would learn what we were doing, but that would take many more days than we had in America. Nevertheless, I was “gung-ho” about giving it a start, and we had Colonial Market as a backup.

So, every day we went out for our alms round in Niantic at about 8:00 a.m. Carrying our bowls, we would walk barefoot to each house and stop for about twenty or so seconds on the roadside. While waiting in front of each house or walking to the next, we would usually practice loving-kindness, even if there was no donor. This is our way.

*May you be free from danger.
May you be free from mental pain.
May you be free from physical pain.
May you be well and happy.*

We would proceed in this way to each house while making our way to the center of town where Colonial Market was. At this point, since our bowls were always empty, we would prepare to go inside the store to obtain our meal for the day. Before we could enter, we needed to put on our flip-flops because our bare feet would violate the health codes. It might sound like a de-feat, but this was where all the fun began!

Properly dressed to code, we would make our way to the customer service desk, where they would page Joey from the dairy section to help us. He was certainly the star of the show. We loved Joey and Joey loved us. Really!

Now Joey is a different type of character than your average person. He is a proud Italian from the Bronx, and he lets everybody know it when he introduces himself. He is quite stout, and I would guess that he is in his late forties or early fifties. He sort of reminds me of one of the California Raisins or one of the M&M characters, but with much more pizzazz. He has an animated personality, and if you could imagine an upbeat cartoon-like character in living color from the Bronx, there he would be.

Joey would then come out and greet us in his usual enthusiastic manner and say, “Joey takes care of everybody!” which was certainly a fact.

He would take a shopping cart and walk around while we pointed at items we needed for our meal. Since we can't cook anything, most items had to be ready-to-eat. In the spirit of Buddhism (see below), we tried to choose only nutritious items, but Joey put an end to that by suggesting items near the donut rack! Whenever we chose something in his style (not so healthy), he would say, “Now you’re

talking!” His major complaint was that we were making him hungry even with our healthy food selections.

Wisely reflecting, I use this alms food, not for fun, not for pleasure, not for fattening, not for beautification. (It is) only for the nourishment and maintenance of this body, for keeping it healthy, for helping with the holy life. Thinking thus, “I will allay this hunger without overeating, so I may continue to live blamelessly and at ease.”

In about ten minutes we would be finished and ready for checkout. Joey would act as our donor and place the food in our bowls instead of shopping bags unless it would not fit. This was how a typical day in Niantic would start. It always put a smile on our faces, and maybe on Joey’s too.

On the way back home, we would walk through a park perched up on a cliff above the ocean. It was very beautiful and quiet as we walked through the empty park along the bluff, the waves below us. However, after a while, we became afraid of Lyme disease since the official name for Niantic is *East Lyme*! As I have always said to my Myanmar friends, America is a dangerous country with nasty diseases! With that in mind, we started to take the roads back home instead.

Nearly every day while on our alms round, someone would stop to look at us, smile, or say something to us. Some stopped to talk while most just said hello. I was very careful not to fail their Hello Tests! Even though we did not get any food from the people on the street, we felt like we always gotten something else from them. Perhaps a smile can be nutritious too.

Although receiving food would have been nice, that was not our real purpose. Most people had never seen a monk before, and we believed it was very beneficial for the local people to see such a thing. Sometimes we would not need to go collect our food because someone had arranged to bring us our meal. Sometimes it would rain and we were not so happy about going out in the cold rain. Even so, we felt it was our duty to walk about town no matter what the conditions were. After doing this for five weeks, it became clear to me how Buddhism had spread so quickly in Asia.

Many people were interested to see what we were all about, and they asked questions about who we were and what we were doing. Most had some idea that we were Buddhist monks. However, one person kindly asked if we were Hari Krishna followers, while two others on separate occasions thought we had just gone swimming. They

thought our robes were actually towels! “How’s the water?” one kind woman called from her porch! As I said earlier, Theravada Buddhism is pretty much unknown in America compared to Tibetan Buddhism, but we had many opportunities to introduce this Old-School tradition to many. It was an honor to do this in America and we found people quite receptive.

One woman approached us on the street and said, “I’ve seen you walking a few times and I wanted to say hello.” She was an Episcopal chaplain in a nearby town and a volunteer chaplain at the women’s prison a few miles away. She arranged for us to speak to a group in the prison. Unfortunately, I had to cancel at the last minute because of a dental emergency. It is not every day one gets to speak to a captive audience! Although speaking at a prison as a visitor would have been something to write home about, I will only get a chance to speak about the invitation. After Kauai, perhaps that was best!

The chaplain was very interested in Buddhism and came to our house five or six times between 6:30 and 7:30 a.m. for meditation. She learned how to meditate – or learned how difficult meditation can be. Nevertheless, she was quite grateful to come in contact with us and we felt the

same way. It turned out that her two sons had done a 10-day Goenka meditation course. One was actually going to do a course while we were in Niantic. She was so interested in what we were doing. Sometimes she invited us to make a special trip to walk by her house during our alms round and collect our morning meal the traditional way! She had a warm heart, and we wish her the best.

We also met another woman while exiting Colonial Market. "It's not every day that monks stop by Niantic!" she said. She offered to bring us some food as well. When she would stop by the house, we would get to talking, and it turned out she was one of my mother's playmates when she was a child. Imagine that! An even more interesting point was that her husband (or ex-husband) is a Trappist monk. What strange coincidences! Nearing the end of our visit, she decided to learn how to meditate, and afterward she seemed so happy. It was lots of fun to teach meditation in America.

Although we had planned to stay in Niantic for the entire trip, we spent the second and third week at a monastery in New Britain, CT. My parents were looking to maximize their time with me and were trying to find a place closer to them. Unfortunately, renting a house for only one month

is not an easy task! During the first few days of my visit, I called one of my old teachers named Reverend Haung from the Buddhist Association of Connecticut, in New Britain. He is a Vietnamese Mahayana monk who once offered a Dharma teacher training course near my parents' house. As a layman, I was a very enthusiastic student and quickly wanted to become a monk. Unfortunately, I was unable to get permission from my parents, so I watched from the sidelines while one of my friends took robes.

I was eager to talk to my old teacher and let him rejoice in the fact that I was finally a monk. It was difficult for us to meet since I did not drive. I told him that if my parents were successful in finding a place nearby, it would be easy to meet. He was going to Vietnam soon and suggested we stay at his monastery. Since he knew about the Theravada tradition, he knew we needed an arrangement for meals. In a few days, he called with meals and everything else arranged. The congregation members had volunteered to sign up for "bring the monks a meal" duty. In essence, he had placed me as the abbot and asked me to give some Dharma talks while I was there.

Dharma talk? You mean a sermon, or my thoughts on the world? Hmm... It made me a little nervous, but I thought I might be able to do it even though the allotted 20 minutes was a little too short for my style! I thought I might be better at reading a travel note or two, but now it was time to start talking about Buddhism. I knew this would happen one day, and since I was once a Boy Scout (believe that one?) I came “prepared” with notes from a scripture study I once did. I gave a Dhamma (Dharma) talk on the *Mangala Sutta*. It was relevant to introducing Burmese Buddhism, since the Burmese say *Mingalabar* for “Hello.” Actually, they are saying *Mangala-bar*, which means “good luck” + “may you get.” This is exactly what my last name is all about too since it means “luck.” However, there isn’t really such a thing as good luck in Buddhism. We do not believe in superstitions, omens, oracles, etc. Everything is related to our past actions, and current actions (towards us) are the result. This is where the term *kamma* (*karma*) comes into play. In essence, the Buddha taught that if you do good things, good things will happen to you. Such a novel idea, yes? That is what I like most about Theravada Buddhism. It is so logical that even Mr. Spock would like it. The *Mangala Sutta* lists 38 different actions besides becoming enlightened one can do to bring about *real*

good luck, but I only had time to talk about the first three mentioned in the first verse.

Avoid the fools,

Make associations with the wise.

Respect those who are worthy of respect,

This is the highest blessing.

So... I gave this talk on two different occasions at the Vietnamese monastery. I guess I lucked out because it seemed as though the people enjoyed the talk (phew!). The following week my friend gave a talk on the unique form of meditation taught at Pa-Auk Forest Monastery called Four Elements Meditation. Again, the members of the monastery seemed pleased by our presence.

Throughout our trip we made it a point to go walking with our alms bowls in search of food every day. We knew we would not get any food, but we felt it was our duty, as I said before. We even did it while we stayed in New Britain. This neighborhood was a little different from the charming little town of Niantic. There was a great deal of broken glass around, and the neighborhood had people to match it too! I do not remember Mr. Rogers talking about this type of neighborhood! Red and black clothes seemed to be a trendy color for the locals! I never saw the movie *Colors*,

but I'm pretty sure that many of these fashion-conscious people were actually gang members! In the end, everyone except for some religious folks (many of whom were probably former gang members) was somewhat nice to us.

We had walked around one neighborhood for about a week when a teenager asked us, "Did somebody dare you to do this?" That was close enough to asking about what we were doing, so I explained who we were and where we were from. Later that night, I thought about his use of the word "dare." It was a word that would be used for gang initiations or fraternity initiations. Although this was my old college town, I do not think anyone in this neighborhood was applying for a frat membership! I followed that thought and started thinking about how someone might dare a person to shoot or stab an innocent person (like a monk) as part of his initiation. At that moment, I decided we should switch neighborhoods.

The next day we moved to a neighborhood that had less broken glass. There seemed to be quite a few born-again Christians, though. After a few days, a woman who lived on the new street asked what we were doing. I explained that we were Buddhist monks and were collecting food. She replied, "If you believe in *Jeee-sus* you don't need to

go looking for food!” I thought to myself, “Oh Lord! She’s going to try to convert us!”

At that time there was a small gathering of people, and we even saw a patrol car come watch us from a distance for a minute or two until a very big guy came out of his house armed with a... Bible! Before he could find his favorite page to read to us, I explained that we were not trying to convert people to our religion unless someone was sincerely interested in learning about Buddhism. I said that we were not looking for money, and spoke about some other monastic rules. Lastly, to give them some light at the end of their tunnel, I explained that we would be moving on soon (back to Niantic) and were only looking for some food. Another person who seemed pleased with this said:

Shet man, all you want is some food yo, I’ll go right u’stairs and get you some lunch meat and a half a’loaf uh’bread. That’ll setya straight for a’while’yo.

Just as we were just about to get our first house donation, the woman urged him not to, and so he held back. Was she a vegetarian? The next day our new friend called us to go over to his friend's house down the road, and we got our first food donation. These people appeared interested in

what we were doing. They must have heard about what we said to the others down the street. As they put the food in our bowl, they told us to have a safe journey.

The kind donors gave us two pieces of bread and a cup of juice. In Myanmar, many of the donors usually give just a spoonful of rice each until our bowls are filled. Bread is the equivalent of rice in America. Unfortunately, since there was only one donor, it was not enough for our meal. However, we had to start from somewhere. We were very grateful for the small amount we received, and it tasted wonderful!

In Myanmar, walking on alms round is a way to give people a chance to do something nice and make merit. In the end, you would guess that the people who made our first donation felt good about what they did. I hope that they remember this random act of kindness for a long time.

In the meantime, the Vietnamese monk had arranged for donors to sign up to bring us food at the monastery. This was very nice as well. We taught them many things about the Theravada tradition that were different from their own Buddhist tradition. I think that they appreciated the

different flavor – and we did too since we were served up home-cooked Vietnamese food.

While in America I was able to connect with many friends I had not seen in ages. Strangely enough, several friends had been far away for a long time, and they too had recently returned to Connecticut. This was a highlight of the trip, and another highlight was to show my monastic friend a little bit of American culture. It was his first time out of Myanmar, let alone visiting America.

I was struck by how smooth American roads are. It is difficult for a Myanmar person to imagine traveling more than sixty-five miles in one hour. Back in Myanmar, you are lucky if you can do that in two or three hours! On the other hand, he would not know about American highway traffic. Our plane had arrived at JFK at around 7:00 a.m., and in order to get to Connecticut, we had to go in the same direction as New York rush hour traffic. You cannot get more authentic than that! Luckily, my fellow monk never got to experience really bad traffic, but I think he'll take our word for it.

The first thing my monastic friend was vocal about was how beautiful the houses were and how each house had “a little park” in front of it. Of course, we call this a front lawn

and some shrubs, which are standard for most houses. In Myanmar that is very rare. Another thing he was surprised to see was that nearly all the houses were of wood construction. In Myanmar, a wooden house would not last long before it would need to be scrapped or repaired since the climate is so wet. If that was not enough, the termites would finish or at least help Mother Nature do the rest of the job. That is why most Myanmar people who can afford it build masonry houses. This is the only way to fight the environmental factors.

I am sure the food was a little new for him too, but he claims he has had most of the “American”-style foods in Myanmar. Real American food surely had a different taste or quality that was distinctive. Furthermore, this was the norm rather than at a “specialty” restaurant in Myanmar.

When we were in New Britain, a man named Vinh came over and offered to show Ashin Paññānanda some of America. Vinh is a retired photographer (a good one too) who was a Vietnamese refugee in the 70s. Since he knows firsthand what someone from a far land would appreciate, he showed my friend around town. Our first cultural sightseeing tour was the typical American shopping mall! We walked a lap inside while I explained about the

different things (mostly useless for a monk) people would buy. I also showed him how expensive things were. A large nice-looking candle that might actually have a use in Myanmar had a twenty-five-dollar price tag! Twenty-five dollars for a candle! You'd feel like you get burned if I told you what costs are like in Myanmar. These very high prices were surely something very new to him.

The next stop was a visit to Home Depot. Here, he was able to get a taste of what an American megastore is like. I explained how smaller stores that once sold the same items no longer exist because it is just too difficult to compete. The prices at Home Depot are much lower and the customer service is very strong. In America, you can return just about anything except used underwear for a full refund, and L.L. Bean would probably allow that too! In Myanmar you need to make sure everything works before you leave the store. Come to think of it, the Burmese might actually enjoy a movie called *The Return*.

The supermarkets were interesting to him too. I showed him what the latest and greatest Whole Foods Market was like. Everything was arranged so nicely – and it was clean too. Nobody was selling dead rats (I'm serious about that one) on the dirt road, and everything was ten to fifty times

more expensive! Again, the prices were the most amazing thing to him. With such high prices, you can afford better customer service and product quality. However, food costing fifty times the Myanmar price is a little too much for even me to digest! The prices of flowers were quite a shocker for him too. Those red flowers that look like little satellite dishes cost about \$7 each. We have several Buddha shrines that each have twenty or thirty of these flowers. This does not include the luscious orchids either.

Overall, it was difficult to get some type of reaction from my friend. He is much less expressive than I am. I also arranged for quick tour of Boston and New York to make his trip a little more worth the while. He was a great help, and as I said before. If he had not come, I wouldn't have either.

The main purpose of having Ashin Paññānanda come was to help make sure I would come back, to give me some monastic support, and to help keep the monastic rules. As I said to the embassies, he would be there to “hold my hand.” I was very scared because I have heard many unpleasant stories about monks who traveled back to the West to see their friends and family. Some have said they

felt somewhat in limbo between lay life and monastic life. One monk told me he disrobed once after going home.

Knowing my family well, I figured they would eventually ask me to do something I just could not do as a Theravada Buddhist monk. I prepared for the time I would need to tell them I could not do such and such, and have Ashin Paññānanda back me up on it. His presence would make us stronger. It is not such a good idea to stay alone anywhere as a monk, let alone America! My family would see him as a professional monk and conversely see me only as their son dressed in robes. I would expect my parents to respect his way of life since they would only know him as a monk. I would fall somewhere in between but surely better off than if alone.

My preparation worked out well. In the beginning, even while leaving the airport, my father asked many questions that challenged my way of life and some of the rules. Sometimes it was difficult to explain things in a way that would stop him from pounding the same question over and over from different angles. Not touching money and not being able to drive were big issues for him. When I had trouble explaining why we do not do these things, I asked Ashin Paññānanda to help. When he spoke my parents did

not challenge his words as much as they did mine. There was a different vibe when they interacted with him. As I expected, they viewed him as the professional monk, whereas I was just Jeremy in robes who followed the same rules. It will be difficult for my parents to change this view, and I understand. The same will be true for some of my friends. In a nutshell, if you are introduced to someone as Dick, he will always be Dick no matter how hard he tries to have you call him Richard later on.

Arranging for separate housing was definitely a good idea. In addition to the experiment, it was more in line with the rules and gave us the monastic freedom to be monks in our own place. In Niantic we had our own little turnkey monastery. Monks do not need much, so an empty house pretty much did the trick. I knew America would be quite a shock to my system since I had spent the past five years in a forest monastery. Our little monastery allowed us to attempt to live a life similar to what we'd led before. As usual, we went for alms round in the morning after early-morning meditation, and then meditated in the afternoon and evening.

Although having our own place gave us a peaceful refuge while visiting a country that invented the phrase "*hustle*

and bustle,” I found myself having scheduling problems partway through the trip. It did not take long before I had a calendar that marked off which days I would have visitors or go somewhere. It was strange how the hustle and bustle of American life gently crept up on me. If someone wanted to arrange to see me, I would find myself checking my calendar and saying, “Tomorrow is fully booked, but the day after that I have a small slot for you. However, the day after next is completely free!” With a schedule like that I might as well wear a business suit!

Nevertheless, things flowed quite smoothly, because whenever any of my expectations proved unrealistic, I quickly dropped it. That is one thing I learned very well in my life at the monastery: Having expectations is the key to unhappiness. Don’t you agree? Well, maybe you don’t. In any case, I had visitors and people to see. That was my main reason for going to America, so I decided not to fight the situation and to work with what I had. I meditated in between my visits and appointments. I did not get upset and just let things flow, letting situations direct my time. Without a doubt living in a Myanmar monastery is a much more peaceful way to live, but this trip was something that I had to do. I tried the best I could with my arrangements,

and the turnkey monastery surely helped keep the balance in my busy American visit.

You might want to hear more about what my family's reaction was like. It was quite warm. At first they (except for my brother) rejected the idea of my becoming a monk. As time went on, they realized that rejecting the monk was rejecting Jeremy. They had come to a point where they would accept me for who I was and what I was doing *as a member of their family*. They had to learn that to accept the terms of my new life would be a way to make a new or modified relationship grow. I also realized that one of the main reasons why my family rejected the monk was because *the monk didn't come home for nearly seven years*. This was another reason to go back home for a visit. I needed to show them I still existed somewhere in my robes and that it was not as bad as they speculated. My brother told me that some family members were a little worried that I would be some type of brainwashed zombie cult member like some movies and TV shows depict. Obviously, they were relieved to find that this was not the case.

My father had a few difficulties in trying to accept me, but he was trying, and that was what counted. I appreciated

the way he interacted with me. He would ask me many questions with two motives. One was to reveal a hole in my logic for becoming a monk, and the other was to understand my new way of life. His two motives were actually only one: *To try to understand*. I enjoyed the time with him the most because the subjects we talked about were Buddhism and monasticism rather than this or that. While seeing the current condition of the States was interesting, teaching my family about monastic life was more in line with what I wanted to do. I hope that we can discuss some other things in the future too.

My father was also concerned about my long-term well-being. He feared that as time went on, I would be more and more *stuck* in the world of monasticism. In other words, it would be more and more difficult for me to get a job as a computer programmer! He wanted to know if I would be taken care of if I became an invalid or something like that. You might ask this question too. Pa-Auk Forest Monastery is equipped with an eight-room infirmary staffed by monks with medical degrees, like Ashin Paññānanda. If problems are beyond what our staff can handle, there are hospitals in several major cities especially for monks. Hospital visits do happen, and trust me, the free hospitals for monks are much nicer than the

regular ones! I bet you don't believe me on that one, but it's true.

My brother has always been supportive and accepting. He is a social worker and specializes in helping family members accept one another as long as it is not damaging to the family's well-being. He did much counseling work with the family before I came. He was surely a major factor making my visit possible. I had several nice visits with him and with my mother and my sister too.

My mother certainly went beyond the call of duty when it came to running errands for my visit. She tried very hard to make me feel comfortable in the strange land of America, and she even called me S. When it came to food, there were more than a few dashes of love and care. I remember my last meal very clearly. Recently, she sent me a birthday card that quoted Henry David Thoreau: "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you've imagined."

So, even though I have spent a long time talking about America, you might still be thinking, "So what did you *really* think of America?" Hmm... It is difficult to say. Certainly, it is a different world than the one I knew before. I do not say this just because I am a monk. Other people

had *warned* me before I went home. Sure, there were the mobile phones, the high-speed wireless Internet connections, and the expansion of Dunkin' Donuts, but there also seems to be a whole vibration that is different. However, maybe they are all related.

I have to gloat over the prediction I made back in Hong Kong in 2000:

The cell phone phenomenon has totally gone out of control from the last time that I was here in '93. The last time I was here, people were using cell phones like they are currently used today in the States. You know... one person here and there talking on the street every once in a while. The usage has gone way up, and I'm sure you will see this increase in the States without a doubt. A recent newspaper article stated that seventy percent of all adults have cell phones. Just about everyone I have met had a cell phone with enormous airtime budgets. Cell phones are used all the time – on the streets, ferries, and trams. If you ever felt like you were a slave to your pager, e-mail, or phone, just wait until everyone has a cell phone and the rates are cheaper. Just wait until it's your main form of communication. People

in HK will actually get upset if you don't use your cell phone (that means you need to turn it on and carry it with you).

So, was I right or was I right? Even my father has a mobile phone, and it comes with blue teeth too! I thought he would be the last person in the world to get a cell phone. Maybe he was. However, he's off the hook when it comes to the cell phone craze since he doesn't always carry his phone with him or keep it turned on. As I said before, other people get upset with someone with those mobile phone habits.

With mobile phones, there are minute plans, and from my perspective, it seemed as though many people could use some minutes for themselves. *I observed that time was tighter than ever before and people were doing more than ever before.* I blame the mobile phones while others may blame the price of gas.

As always, I wish there were something I could do to bring more peace *to those who feel they need it.* I suggest meditation or just simply doing nothing. That means scheduling an hour at home for that every day. That means no meeting people, no going anywhere, no looking

at a screen or listening to music. Just sitting. *Zazen* is what they call that in Japan.

If that is too simple, there is always my ongoing recommendation to travel to Kauai. Here are some more thoughts about Kauai:

Bring me back to the Kauai Island
Right in the heart of the blind diamond,
Where it rains and still keeps shining.
Where the water falls
And the rain, it bows.
It's The-Eyes-Closed-Beautiful.
Just like a lei wrapped around my soul.
It's just like a lei wrapped around my soul.

Committing random acts of kindness and senseless beauty are on my bring-you-peace-list as well. Take the time to write a thank-you note to someone who has influenced you. Write a letter to the manager or owner of a store commending an employee like Joey from the Bronx. In this day and age, the world is surely starved of appreciation. One of my favorite acts as a lay person was to drop coins in a vending machine and then walk away without selecting anything. Go ahead – be creative and

make someone's day. Go ahead – and smile at someone you don't know. Go ahead – and let go, forgive, and love.

If you are a reader, I recommend *Walden*. I have always thought it such a lovely book. I admire the life Thoreau chose to live. He chose a simple life, even for a time we would call “those good ol’ simple days.” So too I have been living the simple life in the forest for over five years. In America, the way many people were living was a little foreign to me. My life is surely not perfect but I like what it has to offer.

When I came back to Myanmar rainy season was in full force. I love the rain and found my ku□ i calm and peaceful. The sounds of the forest and the tapping rain on my tin roof were very soothing. Relaxed and at ease, I was pleased to have the forest as my refuge. Contemplating this, I was grateful that I followed my passion to live the simple life, the monastic life, the life of Bhikkhu S. Contemplating this further, I was grateful for “The Return.”

*May you be free from danger.
May you be free from mental pain.
May you be free from physical pain.
May you be well and happy.*

Bhikkhu S.

The Secret Tunnel of O'Hare

October 23, 1993

I had just arrived in Chicago from New Mexico to catch my connecting flight to Hartford with about an hour layover. So what is one to do with over an hour to spare in O'Hare International Airport? Even though I am still in college, extremely poor, and have only been flying for eight months, I have acquired knowledge of the "secret tunnel"! Many travelers fly countless miles without having the burden of catching another plane on the other side of the airport. These people, with the exception of those reading this, never know of this secret tunnel.

My first experience with this tunnel was in 1993 during a marathon sprint to catch a connecting flight within 15 minutes of landing.

"How do I get to this 'A24 Gate'?" I asked a knowledgeable-looking person in a uniform.

"Go straight down that way, and hang a left through the tunnel," she said, pointing down the corridor.

"The tunnel?" I thought to myself. Without time to ponder, I ventured down "that way" and "hung a left," descending

into a tunnel with colored lights flickering oh so gently as I became immersed in the neon display accompanied by old-style “new age” music.

“Left: Walk” and “Right: Stand,” read the signs on the moving platform. Since I was in a rush, I journeyed towards the left, walking on a moving platform at a calculated 2.497 times the speed of “regular walking.” Immediately, a warm trance came over my rushed body, and before I knew it, a voice projecting from a hidden speaker was telling me to be aware of the moving platform’s termination.

“Phew, that was a close one!” I thought as I nearly stumbled onto the stationary floor. “Is it over?” I asked myself in despair before I noticed another moving platform ten feet ahead. This was my chance to go to the slower track so I could enjoy this wonderful array of neon lights flickering before my eyes. “Go to the right! Go to the right!” I implored myself, but the flow of pedestrian traffic would not allow for a high-speed lane change. I finished my journey with remorse, but I knew I would be back before my flying days were over. “We’ll meet again, my flickering tunnel!” I said, knowing this last connecting

flight would push me over the 20,000 frequent flyer mile mark.

Back to the Present

So, what is one to do with an hour layover between flights in O'Hare International Airport? Although my upcoming connecting flight did not require a journey through the tunnel, I went down "that way" and "hung a left," descending into the realm of neon consciousness.

Already I felt like an old hand in the airport. I enjoyed the ecstatic colorful display until I realized I would need to turn around and go back the other way. "Gee, someone might catch on that I'm not really headed towards the other side," I thought, looking at the continuous array of travelers scattered on the moving platform.

With that in mind I pretended to look at the connecting flight monitors for a couple of minutes to let a fresh crowd filter through. As soon as I thought it was clear, I journeyed towards the moving platform again. I decided to go towards the left, this time just to add some thrill and excitement to the experience. It was not because I still had over 25 minutes left to kill.

As I headed back through the tunnel at 2.497 times the speed of normal walking, a woman in front of me was

laughing – laughing with the biggest grin on her face, walking slower, slower, and slower until we finally crossed paths.

“I saw you... I saw you going the other way!” she said hysterically as we both laughed, knowing we were the only two people in the entire airport playing in the neon tunnels of O’Hare.