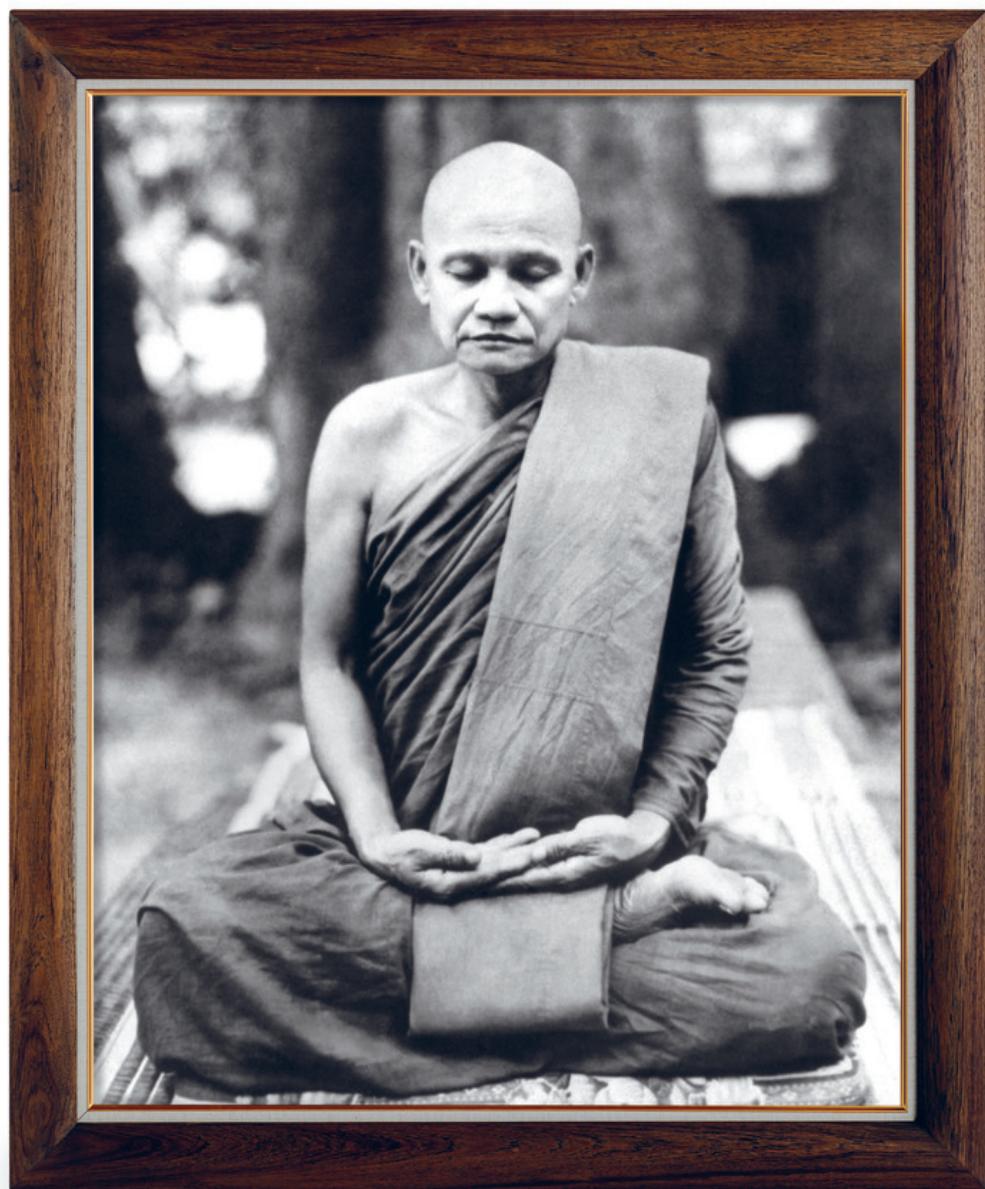


# STILLNESS FLOWING

The Life and Teachings of Ajahn Chah







## STILLNESS FLOWING

---

*The Life and Teachings of Ajahn Chah*

Ajahn Jayasaro

Stillness Flowing – The Life and Teachings of Ajahn Chah  
by Ajahn Jayasaro

Published by Panyaprateep Foundation

ISBN 978-616-7930-09-1

Copyright © Panyaprateep Foundation 2017

Cover Photograph: Gunt Susangkarakan

Photographs: Ajahn Cagino, Jirasak Praisarnkul, Pakorn Musikaboonlert

Retouching: Woranad Phansue, Jitra Navasavat, Subhasiri Subhakoon

Illustrations: Kullachart Sitjasech

Excerpts are used from the following works:

*The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*  
translated from the Pali by Acharya Buddharakkhita

*Venerable Father: A Life with Ajahn Chah*  
by Paul Breiter, published in 2004 by Cosimo, Inc.

*The Autobiography of Phra Ajaañ Lee*  
translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

*Merit and Spiritual Growth*  
by Bhikkhu Bodhi, published in 1995 by The Buddhist Publication Society  
as Wheel 259, Nourishing The Roots

*Fragments of a Teaching and Notes from a Session of Questions and Answers*  
translated by Jack Kornfield, published in 1972 by World Fellowship of Buddhists

*A Child of the Northeast*  
by Kampon Boontawee, published in 1987 by Pouyzian Publisher

*Sabbadānam dhammadānam jināti*  
'The gift of Dhamma surpasses all other gifts.'

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Produced with the L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X typesetting system, set in Gentium, Fontin Sans, Cormorant  
and Crimson Roman.

*First edition, printed in Malaysia, 2017*

*Bhavaggupādāya avīci hetṭhato  
Ethantare sattā kāyūpapannā  
Rūpi arūpi ca  
Asaññī saññino  
Dukkhā pamuccantu  
Phusantu nibbutim.*

From the highest existence down to the lowest,  
whatever groups of beings there exist,  
whether with or without a physical form,  
conscious or non-conscious,  
may they all be free from dukkha,  
and enjoy the happiness of Nibbāna.

This book is not for sale.  
It is a gift of Dhamma to you, the reader,  
from lay Buddhists in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

For e-book and audiobook download see [forestsangha.org](http://forestsangha.org)

# *Contents*

<i>Foreword</i>	xiii
<i>by Ajahn Sumedho</i>	
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>by Ajahn Jayasaro</i>	
<b>I · A Life Expired</b>	1
<i>The Death of Luang Por Chah</i>	
A Death, 1 · A Cremation, 3.	
<b>II · A Life Inspired</b>	17
<i>1918-1954</i>	
A Suitable Locality, 17 · Growing Up, 21 · The Path of Practice, 44 · New Directions, 115.	
<b>III · Off the Beaten Track</b>	123
<i>Wat Nong Pah Pong</i>	
Settlers, 123 · Golden Days, 137.	
<b>IV · A Life Inspiring</b>	161
<i>Luang Por the Good Friend</i>	
Introduction, 161 · Imponderables Anyway, 164 · Sketches, 176 · From Heart to Heart, 193.	

<b>V</b> · Lifeblood	211
<i>Luang Por and the Vinaya</i>	
Introduction, 211 · Pāṭimokkha: The Core of the Vinaya, 214 · Observances: Adding Layers, 245 · The Ascetic Practices: Adding Intensity, 298.	
<b>VI</b> · The Heart of the Matter	315
<i>Meditation Teachings</i>	
Nuts and Bolts, 315 · Thorns and Prickles, 336 · Ways and Means, 347 · Calm and Insight, 360.	
<b>VII</b> · Polishing the Shell	383
<i>Monk's Training</i>	
Introduction, 384 · Parts of a Whole, 391 · The Marvel of Instruction, 413 · A Well-Rounded Training, 450.	
<b>VIII</b> · From Distant Lands	481
<i>Luang Por and the Western Sangha</i>	
Introduction, 481 · The First Disciple, 486 · Through Western Eyes, 500 · On the Nose, 518 · Knower of the Worlds, 525 · The Twain Shall Meet, 537.	
<b>IX</b> · Dying to the World	551
<i>Maechee Training</i>	
Introduction, 551 · Forest Nuns, 553 · Venerable Father, 564.	
<b>X</b> · Out of Compassion	581
<i>Luang Por and the Lay Community</i>	
Introduction, 582 · To the monastery, 585 · Sammādiṭṭhi, 594 · First Meetings, 640 · The Manyfolk, 649 · Family Life, 668 · Dhamma Practice, 678.	

XI · Ice in the Sun	699
<i>Luang Por's Waning Years</i>	
Body Sick, Mind Well, 699 · More to It, 720.	
XII · A Broader Canvas	729
<i>Luang Por in the West – 1977 &amp; 1979</i>	
Inner Land – Outer Land, 729 · Dutiyampi: And For a Second Time, 752 · The Last Night, 784.	
 <i>Appendix I</i>	790
<i>Illustrations</i>	
 <i>Appendix II</i>	794
<i>Photographs</i>	
 <i>Appendix III</i>	801
<i>Thai Transliteration</i>	
 <i>Glossary</i>	802

Abbreviations used in the text:

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
Cv	Cullavagga
Dhp	Dhammapada
DN	Digha Nikāya
It	Itivuttaka
Ja	Jātaka
Khp	Khuddakapāṭha
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
Mv	Mahāvagga
Paṭis	Paṭisambhidā
Pr	Pārājika
Pv	Parivāra
SN	Samyutta Nikāya
Sn	Sutta Nipāta
Th	Theragāthā
Thī	Therigāthā
Ud	Udāna
Vin	Vinaya Piṭaka
Vin-a	Vinaya Aṭṭhakathā (Samantāpāsādikā)
Vism	Visuddhimagga

# *Foreword*

*Ajahn Sumedho*

This biography of Luang Por Chah<sup>\*</sup> will be an important aid in preserving the memories, and sharing the experiences, of those of us who lived and trained with him. I, myself, first met Luang Por Chah in 1967 and was immediately impressed with his silent presence. At that time, I couldn't speak Thai, and he couldn't speak English. At first, we relied on two Thai monks as interpreters. But they soon left, and I began to make efforts to learn the Thai language and the Northeastern dialect.

In fact, Luang Por Chah's teachings were so practical that they were independent of words, explanations and interpretations. Our life at Wat Pah Pong was based on awareness and mindfulness, on being aware of the state of mind, being aware of what you are actually feeling. To do this, you were not dependent on a particular language. This simple teaching was about observing the state of mind, the *ārammaṇa*, the emotional reality that is present; to be aware of it; to see it in terms of the three characteristics: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. I could practice in this way, even during that initial period when I could not, as yet, understand the verbal teachings.

Luang Por's whole attitude towards life was one that motivated me to want to train and live as a *bhikkhu*. To me, he was a living example of the result of Buddhist meditation in the Thai Forest Tradition. He inspired me. Through living close to him and getting to trust him, by listening to him as I began to understand the language, I discovered how gifted he was

<sup>\*</sup>See 'Honorifics' on page xvii.

in giving Dhamma talks and reflections. I appreciated how he always had time for the monks and nuns and the lay community.

Nowadays, there is interest throughout the world in the teachings of Luang Por Chah. This was not the case when I first met him fifty years ago. In those days, he was hardly known outside of Ubon Province. Today, his fame has spread worldwide. Although it is now twenty-five years since he passed away, his teachings are so practical that they continue to resonate. Luang Por always emphasized the importance of practice. He pointed out how each one of us can apply the Buddha's teachings in our life and make them work.

I wish to express my gratitude to Ajahn Jayasaro for writing this biography of Luang Por Chah, and making this publication available. I know that it will be appreciated by a great many people. It gives me joy to think of all the people throughout the world who, through reading this book, will begin to appreciate the teachings of Luang Por Chah.

# *Preface*

*Ajahn Jayasaro*

This book has been a long time in the making. After a productive beginning in 1996, I put the manuscript aside for around ten years. At first, the responsibilities of leading a large monastic community gave me little time to devote to the project. Subsequently, a long period of retreat gave me time but took away the inclination. Over the following years, the manuscript became like a dear old friend. I would return to it every few months, enjoy having some quality time together, and then with a click, say goodbye. It was only as two important dates began to loom – the 25th anniversary of Luang Por Chah’s death in 2017, and the 100th anniversary of his birth in 2018 – that I was forced to accept that, at my present rate of progress, the book would never be completed. I adopted a regular writing schedule and, slowly, the book you hold in your hands at last took shape.

*Stillness Flowing* has an important precursor. In 1987, while Luang Por lay seriously ill, I was asked by the Elders of Wat Pah Pong to write an official biography. The book was to be distributed at his funeral, whenever that might be. It was a great honour but an intimidating one. I was not confident that my Thai prose style was up to the task. Eventually, however, with the help of fellow Thai monks, and one very skilled nun in particular (who has always insisted on her anonymity), it was accomplished; the book was published in time for Luang Por’s funeral in January 1993. To compensate for my shortcomings as a writer, the text emphasized Luang Por’s own words and the transcribed testimonies of his disciples. I gave the book the name, *Upalamani* – a play on words. It means both ‘Jewel in the Upala Lotus’ and ‘Jewel of Ubon’.

*Stillness Flowing* features numerous passages translated from *Upalamani*, in particular many of the anecdotes and reminiscences of Luang Por's disciples. The most obvious difference between the texts is the exclusion here of a number of full-length Dhamma talks (now available in translation elsewhere), and most of the photographs. At the same time, a large amount of social, cultural, historical and doctrinal content that I did not consider necessary to supply for a Thai audience, has been added to this English biography, as have new sections of analysis.

Although it has been my intention that this book should be, as far as possible, a biography as opposed to a hagiography, I am not sure that I have been completely successful. My love for Luang Por and my belief in his enlightenment inevitably colour the text. What I have not done is suppress any scandalous or embarrassing information out of concern for his good name. Hard as it may be to accept nowadays when there is so much – and often well-founded – cynicism about the integrity of religious figures, Luang Por Chah had absolutely nothing to hide. The only skeleton in a cupboard at Wat Pah Pong was the one hanging on public display in the Dhamma Hall. In fact, that is one of the strongest reasons for my belief that the life of Luang Por Chah is so worthy of study.

All those that remember him have their own Ajahn Chah. This book represents mine. If it includes any mistakes or oversights I accept full responsibility, and ask for your forgiveness.

Janamāra Hermitage  
July 2017

## HONORIFICS

The ordination procedure requires a monk to possess a Pali name which, in Thailand, is usually chosen by the preceptor. The first letter of the name is determined by the day of the week on which the monk was born. Luang Por Chah's Pali name was 'Subhaddo'; it means 'excellent, noble or happy'. The initial 'S' indicates that he was born on a Friday.

Pali names are rarely used by monks in Thailand (the main exception being the Western disciples of Luang Por Chah). After ordination, Thai monks continue to answer to their birth names, preceded by an appropriate honorific. The use of Pali names is restricted to official documents. On such a document, Luang Por Chah, for example, would have appeared as 'Venerable Chah Subhaddo'. Written protocols become more complex when monks receive monastic titles (as did Luang Por Chah in 1976), and lie beyond the scope of this introduction.

It is considered rude to refer to a monk without an honorific preceding his name. Customs vary throughout Thailand as to the particular prefix used. In Isan forest monasteries 'Krooba' is the most common honorific used to address a monk of less than ten years in the monkhood. In Wat Pah Pong, 'Tan' is also often used. 'Ajahn' refers to a monk of ten years or more (although in practice this term is employed much more loosely, and these days is used in non-monastic contexts to refer to any kind of teacher). Monks in their middle age start to be called 'Luang Por' (Venerable Father) and in their old age, 'Luang Pu' (Venerable Paternal Grandfather). Monks who ordain after raising a family are referred to affectionately as 'Luang Ta' (Venerable Maternal grandfather). This term has now gained a new gravity after the revered master, Luang Ta Maha Bua, adopted it for himself in his old age. The utmost respect is shown when monks are referred to in the third person as 'Por-Mae-Krooba-Ajahn', literally 'father-mother-teacher'.

In the books of teachings translated from Thai into other languages, it has been customary to refer to the subject of this book as 'Ajahn Chah', and for this reason, that has been chosen as the honorific used in the subtitle of this book. This is not, however, how he has been generally known in Thailand, and, aside from the subtitle and a few scattered instances

throughout the text, I have preferred to use the term that has been most common amongst his disciples: ‘Luang Por Chah’. As it has seemed too cumbersome to repeat the whole name on every page of this book, the ‘Chah’ has mostly been omitted. Readers are asked to note that ‘Luang Por’, the name repeated hundreds of times throughout this biography, is a generic term, rather than a specific name. Many of the monks referred to in the text are now also commonly called ‘Luang Por’ or even ‘Luang Pu’. In this book, I have referred to them all here as ‘Ajahn’, except for some important figures who were senior to Luang Por Chah.

#### A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

This book features a number of words in the Pali and Thai languages. In its representation of Pali, this book typically adopts the conventions for romanization used by the Pali Text Society. Exceptions to this rule exist in instances of certain Pali words which have been accepted as English by the Oxford English Dictionary (e.g. ‘Pali’, ‘Sangha’, ‘Theravada’) and in the common renderings of the Pali names of Western monks.

As for the transliteration of Thai, given that the Thai language possesses a number of consonants and vowels not found in English, transliteration is difficult, and no universally agreed upon system of rules exists. This book follows the currently accepted transliteration conventions of the Ajahn Chah community. An Appendix provides a list, in Thai script, of the most commonly used words. Readers desiring a better idea of how the Thai words featured in the book are pronounced may consult the more consistent transliteration system outlined at:

<http://www.jayasaro.panyaprateep.org/transliteration>

### *Acknowledgements*

---

I would like to express my appreciation to all my teachers, friends and students who have contributed to this project, including the Kataññutā group in Kuala Lumpur, and all those whose generosity have made it possible to distribute the book as a gift of Dhamma, without charge.

My thanks, in particular, to my editors: Ven. Kovilo, Ven. Munissara, Jan Davies and Joe DeLeo; to Ven. Gambhiro for the typesetting; and to Ven. Phasuko for the artwork. Three deep bows to Ajahn Pasanno who has offered his unwavering support and encouragement to me throughout the long gestation of this book, and indeed, throughout my whole bhikkhu life.





*I  
a life expired*

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

*Dhp 410*

# *A Life Expired*

*The Death of Luang Por Chah*

## I. A DEATH

The twentieth of January, 1983. At the small provincial airport of Ubon Ratchathani in Northeast Thailand, a group of Buddhist monks and lay supporters look up to the sky. Nearby, a white ambulance is parked on the runway. A loud droning sound can be heard, its source soon traced to a Thai Air Force plane lumbering in to land. After the plane taxies and comes to a halt, its door opens and reveals an unusual and moving sight. An impossibly large Western monk starts to descend from the plane, cradling in his arms a much older and smaller Thai monk. This frail and helpless-looking figure is the revered master, Luang Por Chah. After five long months of tests and consultations in a Bangkok hospital, he has returned to Ubon in order to spend the last days of his life at home in his monastery, Wat Nong Pah Pong, surrounded by his disciples.



As it transpired, the last days of Luang Por's life came to exceed three thousand. It was not until 5.20 a.m. on the sixteenth of January, 1992 that he finally passed away. By that time, he had survived such a succession of medical crises that it had seemed to many of his disciples that he could both leave them at any moment, and that somehow, he never would. There was a hope and expectation that before he left the world he would perform some kind of psychic marvel. But he did not. At last, when his

kidneys and his heart could no longer function, he went gentle into the good night.

As soon as his passing was confirmed, the monks who were present, including Ajahn Liem, the abbot, gathered around his bed to chant the verses of reflection on the impermanent nature of conditioned reality. Then they set to work with the utmost care and attention, washing Luang Por's body and clothing it in a new full set of robes.

News of the death spread quickly. As a chill morning dawned, monks, nuns and close lay disciples began arriving to pay their respects. They did not come to mourn and few tears were shed. But although Luang Por's death had been no surprise, it was, nevertheless, a shock. A heavy, stunned feeling hung in the air.

As the day progressed, a steady trickle of people grew into a stream and then a river. Over a million people would bow to Luang Por's body before it was cremated exactly one year later.

A seven-day period of Royal Funeral Rites sponsored by the King was announced. In the evening, Dr Chao Nasilawan, the King's representative, arrived to perform the traditional water pouring ritual before the coffin containing Luang Por's body\* was moved to the main Dhamma Hall. There it was placed in a polished dark wood casket ornately decorated with figures carved in mother-of-pearl. A photograph of Luang Por was placed to the left of the casket together with his robes and bowl and other requisites. Wreaths from the King and Queen and other members of the Royal Family were placed to the right. In front of the casket, elaborate flower arrangements completed the shrine.

The monastery announced a fifteen-day period of Dhamma practice consisting of chanting, meditation and Dhamma talks, open to all. Similar events would mark fifty- and one hundred-day ceremonies of commemoration. Now was the time, senior disciples said, to wholeheartedly cultivate the Dhamma through body, speech and mind, and dedicate the accrued merit as an offering to Luang Por. Their wise and compassionate teacher

\*In light of the plan to keep the body for a year, copious amounts of Chinese tea, tobacco and lime were placed in the coffin.

was no more for this world, but they would never forget him, or the things that he had taught them.

## II. A CREMATION

A winter afternoon in Ubon Province, Northeast Thailand, Saturday the sixteenth of January, 1993. A forest monastery, like a dark green patch upon a pale fabric of rice fields that stretch out fallow and dry. Tonight, it will be cold and windy, but in mid-afternoon the temperature in the shade of the gently swaying trees is 33 degrees. The calm and order of the scene belies a barely credible fact. Today, in an area usually inhabited by a hundred monastics, some four hundred thousand people are gathering – a number exceeding the population of any Thai city other than Bangkok. A year after the death of Luang Por Chah, it is the day of his cremation.

There is a restrained but amiable hum of conversation in the air; the atmosphere is by no means funereal. Most people are dressed in white, the traditional colour of the lay Buddhist, although many official guests are in uniform and attendees from Bangkok are mainly in black. People sit on small mats and plastic sheets wherever they can find a space; for the most part, they are exposed to the sun. Many are reading from one of the Dhamma books being distributed at the monastery entrance. They look up every now and again to enjoy the scene around them. Older village folk may be seen chewing betel nut. Dispersed throughout the multitude, cross-legged figures practise meditation.

The number of people inside the monastery is constantly increasing. Outside, police are directing an interminable stream of traffic along a narrow road gaily lit with flags: the flapping of the yellow Dhamma-wheel banners and the Thai tricolours extending as far back as the eye can see. White columns of pedestrians make their way along both sides of the road. In the temporary carparks amongst the fields outside the two-metre tall monastery wall, tour buses, minibuses and trucks disgorge group after group of monks, nuns and lay supporters.

They come from all over the country: many from Ubon and its neighbouring provinces of Yasothon, Sisaket and Surin; but also from further

afield: Udon, Nong Khai, Phetchabun – indeed the whole of Isan (North-east Thailand) is represented. There is also a sizeable contingent from Bangkok, while others have travelled from as far north as Chiang Mai and as far south as Songkhla. While some emerge from air-conditioned vehicles looking coiffed and cool, far more pile down from the back of pick-up trucks, stiff and rumpled. But however people have travelled here, once disembarked, they carry with them a similar expectancy and sense of occasion as they join the inexorable flow of people entering the monastery.

One large group, ten and more abreast, files through a large entrance and past soldiers of the royal security detail, who stand in small clumps under trees, as benignly as soldiers can. Municipal water trucks are arriving on their latest trip. To their left, a small village of tented kitchens provides food, free of charge, to all those hungry from their journey. Behind them, discreetly laid back in the forest, they notice with relief long rows of temporary toilets, reassuringly clean. They see a first aid post with many nurses in blue and white uniforms, while at another tent people are lining up to receive free Dhamma books. The newcomers take their bearings from large painted maps by the side of the path. Courteous stewards patrol to and fro. But it is three hundred metres away to their right that all movement is converging in a good-natured, unhurried way. For just within the northern boundary of the forest lies the centre of all attention: a white stupa, thirty-two metres in height, containing the body of Luang Por Chah. Today, this graceful structure will function as the crematorium. Sometime later, a shrine at the heart of its central chamber will house Luang Por's relics on permanent public display.

Today is the culmination of ten days of ceremonies and Dhamma practice. During this period some 6,000 monks, 1,000 nuns and over 10,000 lay Buddhists have camped out in the forest, while a slow tide of visitors has passed through the monastery in order to pay their last respects to the great master. Every day from 3.00 a.m. until 10.00 p.m., all those resident in the monastery have participated in a daily schedule of chanting, meditation and listening to the Dhamma.

Thousands of acts of kindness and generosity, big and small, have been the oil that has lubricated this huge and unprecedented event. Lay supporters

from around the country have set up and financed the make-shift kitchens where volunteers have been hard at work for the whole ten days cooking and serving food to guests from early morning until late at night. Various local government agencies have played their part behind the scenes, and the governor of Ubon has offered all of the resources at his disposal. Many businesses have made donations: one company has provided bottled water by the truck load. Early every morning, local bus companies, truck owners and individual car owners have ferried the thousands of monks into local towns and villages for their daily alms-round.

As the afternoon progresses, and the first cool northerly winds blow through the monastery, anticipation builds. The King and Queen will arrive shortly. Their visit is the culmination of a series of consultations between the monastery and Palace officials over the past months – an indication of how much etiquette is to be observed on such occasions. The royal motorcade arrives at 4.19 p.m. and a ripple of excitement passes through the crowd. Their majesties, King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit, take their seats in the specially constructed royal pavilion to the south of the stupa. The King, as is the custom on such occasions, is dressed in military uniform with a black armband, the Queen in ankle-length black. The Prime Minister and the Head of the Armed Forces take their places some distance behind the royal couple, sitting at the head of the group of dignitaries, all looking a little starched in their white civil service uniforms. In front of them, the elegantly tapering stupa forms an almost magical island, benign and still in the midst of a sea of people.

The sound is muted, remarkably so for such a huge group of people. It is not just that everyone wants to be here; everyone wants to be here in the right way, in a manner most fitting to the final farewell to a man who not only taught the way to peace, but who embodied it so memorably.

The King and Queen are certainly no strangers to large gatherings of people, but they seem to sense something special in the air. The King, a keen photographer, picks up the camera by his side every few moments to take pictures of the splendid sight in front of him. To the front and left of the royal pavilion is the pavilion reserved for the monastic guests of honour, headed by the Supreme Patriarch and including senior monks such as Luang Ta Maha Bua, the most revered forest master in the land;

Chao Khun Phra Debvedi (P.A. Payutto), the most accomplished scholar; and Luang Por Panyananda, the greatest orator.

Everyone else sits on the ground. Three colours predominate: the green of the forest, the white of the nuns, laity and stupa, and the ochre of the forest monks. Almost six thousand monks are present, many seated cross-legged on their sitting cloths by the side of the concrete roads that approach from four sides and surround the stupa. They are still; some gaze at the stupa; many, eyes closed, are meditating. The pale faces and exposed right arms of the Caucasian monks catch the eye: sixty of Luang Por's foreign disciples have converged from branch monasteries around the world. An Italian film crew is shooting a documentary. Journalists with large identity badges pinned to their chests are standing in front of cameras describing the scene. The funeral is being covered live on national radio and television. Tomorrow, it will be front page headlines in every national newspaper.

The designated time arrives and the King and Queen rise from their seats and walk towards the stupa, shaded from the sun by large parasols held by attendants in traditional attire. The crowd on either side of them prostrate as they pass. Now the first part of the day's cremation ceremonies begins. The royal couple, surrounded by photographers and cameramen, enter the stupa. They bow to the coffin and then perform a series of offerings in accordance with a hallowed tradition.

Firstly, they present robes to ten monks of senior ecclesiastical rank. These monks hold ornate fans in their left hand, and before taking possession of their robes, they chant a short verse of reflection on impermanence and cessation. Then, the royal couple offer candles, an elaborately decorated vessel of flowers and folded banana leaves, incense and sandalwood flowers\* to Luang Por. Finally, as monarch and the leader of the lay

\*As sandalwood is now so rare, 'a sandalwood flower' these days consists of cream-coloured paper or crepe cut and twisted into the shape of a flower, and bound together with incense sticks and a thin candle. These are distributed to all the guests at a Thai funeral. Directly before the cremation itself commences, each person places their flower by the side of the coffin in a ritual gesture of respect. At Luang Por's funeral, a small number of honoured guests were presented with flowers carved in real sandalwood.

Buddhists of Thailand, the King presents the ceremonial royal cremation flame in its beautiful glass casket, and returns to the royal pavilion.

Once the royal ceremony has been completed, the monastics, led by the Supreme Patriarch and other senior monks, lay their candles and sandalwood flowers in front of the coffin. Following the monks come the nuns and then the lay Buddhists.

Hundreds of thousands of people attend the cremation of a man they revere – and yet, probably no more than a thimbleful of tears are shed. There is no wailing, no extravagant displays of grief, scarcely a red eye. But why should there be? They are not mourners. They believe that Luang Por was not this body that will shortly be consumed by flames, and that his mind has long been freed. ‘Gone,’ in the words of the Buddha, ‘beyond all descriptions.’

## PREPARATIONS

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

\*In fact, two biographies were written, both for free distribution. The main volume, *Upalamani* was a large hardback book with many photographs. A much-abbreviated paperback book was also produced for general distribution.

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

In November 1990, construction of a large new Dhamma Hall began. It was completed in January 1992, just days before Luang Por’s death. Ajahn Liem took on the role of architect and chief engineer on the project, despite having received only the most basic formal education some forty years before. No plans ever needed to be drawn up because he kept them all in his head. Once completed, the building’s white walls, large open windows connecting inside and out, and a high wood-clad ceiling gave it an airy simplicity well-suited to purpose. Meanwhile, old kutis\*\* were renovated and toilet blocks were built.

Following Luang Por’s death, the old, narrow monks’ dining hall was demolished and a new, much larger one built on the same site between the Dhamma Hall and the Uposatha Hall\*\*\*. For all of this construction, Wat Pah Pong’s strict tradition of abstaining from all direct appeals for donations held fast: donors offering money and building materials came forward of their own volition. All involved took pride in their work and executed it with devotion. There were no cut corners, no sloppy finishes, each person’s labour an expression of gratitude to their teacher.

\*White-robed nun. See Glossary, 811.

\*\*Monks’ dwellings. See Glossary, 810.

\*\*\*The building in which formal ceremonies are performed. See Glossary, 825.

Finally, the only construction project that remained was the most challenging and the most important: Luang Por's stupa. This structure would form a lasting monument to him and house the relics that would provide a focus of devotion and pilgrimage in the future. It was not just that the recovered bone fragments would provide a tangible physical link to the departed teacher. The bones of enlightened ones commonly undergo an as-yet inexplicable chemical transformation. After cremation, fragments remain that bear little resemblance to ordinary bone. In some cases, they may attain an almost jewel-like appearance. Luang Por's relics would be placed on permanent public display at the heart of the stupa.

The Elders decided that the stupa should be constructed in such a way that it might be used as a crematorium on the day of the funeral, and then afterwards, for the crematory to be removed and replaced by the plinth on which Luang Por's relics would be displayed.

An award-winning architect, Nithi Sathapitanon, offered his services free of charge as did chief engineer, Professor Arun Chaiseri. A design was produced that honoured the long tradition of stupa construction in Thailand. Its fifty-metre base took the form of an inverted bell, echoing that of the great stupa of Nakhon Pathom. An elegant spire rose from this base to a height of thirty-two metres, homage to that of That Phanom, the oldest and most revered stupa in Northeast Thailand. Entrances at the four cardinal points of the compass led into a domed inner chamber. Floored with black granite, the chamber's ceiling was painted gold as were the two concentric circles of pillars, the inner of which consisted of four pillars representing the key teaching of the Four Noble Truths, and the outer circle of twelve pillars representing the twelve links of Dependent Origination.

Time was now of the essence. In an expression of the harmony of old and new in the project, a number of the larger sections of the stupa were pre-fabricated in Bangkok and transported by road to the monastery. As usual, the Sangha provided the bulk of the workforce. A request was made to all of the 153 branch monasteries to send monks for two-week shifts, with a particular appeal for those with relevant skill sets. The branch monasteries were divided into six rotating groups. This provided shifts of one hundred, comprised of fifty visiting monks supplementing the

fifty residents. The work was divided into different sections: metalwork, cement work, woodwork and electricity. In one sense, with the funeral looming, it was a race against time, and yet for the monks, the work was also their practice, and they were well aware that less haste meant more speed. The monks dressed as usual, without hard hats and wearing flip-flops on their feet. Although many sustained cuts and bruises over the months of construction, there were no serious injuries. The monks and novices did not work alone. Lay supporters also offered their labour in their free time, and the local army commander sent groups of soldiers at regular intervals. Ajahn Liem said:

“When people work with a spirit of self-sacrifice, it’s not difficult. Nobody made a fuss. Even when we worked late into the night, nobody asked when we were going to stop. Whether it was pouring with rain or the sun was beating down, there were no complaints. And so, the results every day were satisfying. It was a tribute to the harmony of Luang Por’s disciples and, as Sangha work projects go, it was a historical event. We came together and did this task with pure hearts and without paying any attention to feelings of tiredness or exhaustion. Everyone made sacrifices. It was Dhamma through and through.”

On the fifth of January, 1993, after a mere six months of focused effort, the stupa was completed.

The one-year interval between Luang Por’s death and the cremation had worked on many levels. Not only had it allowed sufficient time for the construction of the stupa, it had also given ample opportunity for all the people throughout the country, and throughout the world, who wished to pay their respects to Luang Por’s body, to make their way to Wat Pah Pong. Equally important, if more mundane, the choice of a January cremation ceremony had ensured reasonably temperate weather, and bone-dry, empty fields around the monastery to accommodate the huge number of vehicles.

But it was the year-long accumulation of good deeds and meditation practice, the giving of Dhamma talks and the listening to them – all dedicated to Luang Por – that contributed to the feeling that was so tangible amongst monks, nuns and laity on the day of the cremation. For

them, today was the culmination of a period of reverence and recollection that had been sufficiently long and rich to truly reflect the greatness of the one who had passed away.

#### AFTER DARK

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

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

At midnight, the Dhamma talks end. Two hundred of Luang Por's most senior disciples climb up the stairs to the stupa and enter its inner chamber where Luang Por's body lies in the thin simple coffin, all the surrounding paraphernalia removed. Other senior monks fill the area surrounding the chamber. More monks crowd together on the four sets of steps, the rest form an encircling mass below. The ceremony of 'Asking for Forgiveness' is performed. It is the short ritual enacted whenever monks take formal leave of their teacher.

\*State funerals are divided into two stages. Most guests attend only the first stage, which ends with the donation of the ceremonial flame and the placing of the 'sandalwood flowers'. In most funerals, the actual cremation will take place a little later and only be attended by close family and friends. In this case, the cremation was set for midnight.

Now, at the centre of the stupa, ten white-robed, shaven-headed laymen bow three times in unison to the coffin and, with the greatest of care, lift it up and slide it into the temporary crematory – a large metal box covered with boards decorated with gold wax arabesques and floral designs that give it the appearance of a giant candle.



Ajahn Liem and the governor of Ubon place the royal flame in the crematory, which is tightly packed with sandalwood flowers and numerous sackloads of charcoal. The fire catches quickly, and Ajahn Liem closes the door with a firm twist of the handle. The monks sit in meditation. The silence is punctuated only by the faint sound of insects buzzing around the electric lights outside. But then the temperature in the chamber

starts to rise steeply. Eyes open at the awareness of the acrid smell and thickening air that means smoke is escaping into the chamber. It appears to be caused by a blockage in the chimney flue near the summit of the stupa. The fire is too fierce for the size of the air vents – perhaps too much charcoal or too much sandalwood – and the welded seams of the chimney are bursting. The fire cannot escape outside, and soon flames are licking out of the crematory looking for fuel.

The wax birds surrounding the crematory melt. Flames start to consume the gypsum board and the plywood that conceal its metal walls. Monks file out of the smoke-thick chamber quietly and without fuss. Once outside, many discard their robes and set up a chain. Buckets of water are carried into the chamber and, before too long, the fire has died out leaving the crematory a blackened shell still shrouded with smoke. It is an anarchic episode in a day of order and ceremonies performed with almost military precision, an unplanned epilogue to years of planning. Some people shake their heads at a feat of psychic power; most see a fault in the stupa's design. And others prefer to look on it all as a last flourish of Luang Por's mischievous sense of humour.

Monks put their robes back on. Meditators return to their meditations. The Dhamma talks resume. The cold wind continues to cut through thin cotton robes. Before long, the sky will begin to change colour. Another day will begin.



A dark, moody black and white photograph of a dense jungle scene. In the foreground, a shallow river flows from the left, its surface reflecting the surrounding trees. Large, mossy tree roots and rocks are scattered along the bank. The middle ground is filled with thick brush and foliage, with a large tree trunk visible on the right. The background is a dense canopy of leaves and branches, with sunlight filtering through the gaps.

*II*  
*a life inspired*

*That monk who, while young, devotes himself to the teaching of the Buddha  
illumines this world like the moon freed from clouds.*

*Dhp 382*

# *A Life Inspired*

1918-1954

## I. A SUITABLE LOCALITY

### ISAN

The Buddha declared that all avoidable human suffering is caused by mental defilements, and that these defilements can be completely eliminated by a systematic education of body, speech and mind. Supreme among the virtuous qualities that ‘burn up’ the defilements, he revealed, is forbearance. It is perhaps no coincidence then that the unwelcoming environment of Northeast Thailand – known to its inhabitants as Isan – nurtured a great flowering of Buddhist monasticism in the twentieth century. The vast majority of monastics recognized in Thailand as enlightened masters over the past hundred years have come from this region.

Isan occupies a semi-arid plateau almost square in shape and somewhat larger than England. It is bounded to the north and east by the Mekong River and Laos, and to the south by the thickly jungled mountains of Northern Cambodia. In the early part of the last century, Isan was still separated from central Thailand by the forbidding barrier of Dong Phaya Yen, a huge forest abounding in wild animals and home to a vicious strain of malaria.

Even before the majority of its original forest cover was hacked and burnt away, Isan was never an idyllic land. It lacks the fecundity of the central

Thai valleys: the soils are for the most part impoverished, if not by sand or stone, then by a choking salinity. The rivers flow in deep gullies making it difficult to create channels for irrigation. Very few areas provide more than one crop of sticky rice a year. Ground water is often too salty to drink. Travel has been fraught with difficulty: whereas water was the predominant means of transport in central Siam and the basis of its economic success, the rivers of the land-locked Isan are navigable for only a few months of the year. With little scope for commerce, subsistence farming was, for centuries, the peoples' main occupation, and bartering was their means of exchange.

Isan has three seasons: the cold season, from November through February, is the most comfortable but may be racked at night by harsh winds; the hot season, from March through June, is numbingly hot; and the mid-year rainy season generates a humidity so thick as can make those walking through it feel almost as if they are wading through the air. Life has always hinged on the coming of the monsoon, but the torrential rains that dissolve the fears of drought and crop failure often lead to severe flooding. Nevertheless, the people who have settled this land have been tenacious. They have survived – and somehow flourish.

So, who are the people of Isan and where, originally, did they come from? The majority of its population have always identified themselves, ethnically and culturally, as 'Lao', a name derived from one branch of the peoples who migrated south from what is now southwest China during the first millennium CE in response to the steady encroachment on their land by the Han Chinese. One migration trail passed down through the Chao Phraya River basin, and those who took that route played a significant role in the development of the 'Siamese'/Central Tai civilization. Another branch followed the Mekong southwards and established settlements along its banks which were to contribute to the origins of the ethnic Lao.

They were not, however, the first or only inhabitants of Isan. In Bahn Chiang, there is evidence of a sophisticated culture dating back over 3,000 years. Following waves of Austronesian and earlier diverse Mon-Khmer immigrations, the European Dark Ages saw Isan settled by both Cambodian Hindus of the Chenla Empire and the devoutly Theravadin Buddhist Mons of the Dvaravati Civilization.

Subsequently, Isan formed part of the vast Angkor Empire that dominated Southeast Asia from the eighth until the thirteenth century and that, at its height in the reign of Jayavarman VII, adopted Mahayana Buddhism. The Lao-Tais slowly expanded through the region, absorbing the cultures and genes of their predecessors as they spread, and dyeing all with the distinctive features that it has retained until today.

Perhaps the link between the Lao and Siamese Tai (henceforth referred to simply as Thais) may best be characterized as that between close cousins. This closeness has, however, not prevented the Central Thais, inhabitants of a more benign land, from holding to the conceit of a superior sophistication. In fact, the differences between them are minor. They speak an almost common tongue, although differently, with different tones. In religion, they have both adopted the Sri Lankan form of Theravada Buddhism, incorporating along the way Brahman ceremonials and the ancient animist traditions of their tribe.

#### ON THE WHOLE

The Thais and Lao share a gentle, easy-going nature and are a remarkably tolerant people. The idea of persecuting others for holding beliefs different from their own has always been incomprehensible to them. They are not particularly cerebral – abstract theories and philosophies rarely excite them – but they are skilful pragmatists with a considerable talent for compromise; the bamboo bending in strong winds has always been one of their favourite images. They avoid open confrontation wherever possible and consider the unfiltered expression of strong feeling to be uncouth and immature. They admire the ability to remain calm and unruffled under stress, and they aspire to ‘a cool heart’. If the Lao differ in any discernible way, it is in their more pronounced resilience.

As with all peoples, they are full of contradictions. A somewhat exaggerated concern for rank and status is, for example, often combined with a deep love of independence. Given the loyalty and devotion they have always shown to the rather austere tenets of Theravada Buddhism, it is the frank, uncomplicated sensuality of the people that is perhaps their most surprising feature. Their culture has never considered sensual desires to be a source of guilt. But although they often display a great love of

language, finery and food – in fact, all the so-called good things of life – they reserve their greatest respect for those who can renounce them.

By any of the contemporary secular standards by which the development of a culture is measured – GNP, political power, technological innovation, vibrant art – Isan is an insignificant backwater, its people unremarkable. But from a Buddhist viewpoint, it would not be too fanciful to consider Isan a superpower. Throughout the twentieth century in particular, Isan was an abiding stronghold of Buddhism at a time when all through Asia, other darker isms – imperial, communal, capital, material – were wreaking awful depredations. The vast majority of Thailand's 300,000 monastics are from Isan. Most significantly, almost every one of the Thai monks of the modern age believed to have realized enlightenment, was born in one of the peasant farming villages of the Northeast, many of them in the 'Province of Sages', Ubon Ratchathani.

## UBON

The history of Ubon began in 1778 with the conclusion of a bruising and bloodied migration. Some years previously, the noble Vientiane family of Chao Phra Ta and Chao Phra Wor, together with its large retinue, had fled from the spite of the King of Vientiane, only to be attacked by his forces wherever they settled. Finally, in desperation, during a siege of their latest encampment, a small group of horsemen broke through the encircling forces late one night and rode west for assistance. The King of Siam was sympathetic towards them. His renascent state was rapidly recovering from the devastation of its capital Ayutthaya by the Burmese, and he was keen to extend its power. The Siamese expeditionary army routed the Vientiane forces with ease and went on to sack their city.

Feeling secure at last, the migrants, survivors of a long flight and years of protracted strife, established a permanent settlement on the northern bank of the Moon River, some eighty kilometres west of its confluence with the great Mekong. They called their new home Ubon, after the upala lotus that rises unblemished from the mud. They pledged allegiance to the King of Siam, their saviour and patron. But before all else, as migrating Thai peoples had done for hundreds of years, they built a monastery for the Buddhist monks that had accompanied them.

By the early years of the twentieth century, Ubon town had become the centre of a province which included hundreds of villages and extended over thousands of square kilometres. During the preceding century, Siam had become surrounded by voracious colonial powers: Britain to the south and west and France, ominously, to the east. The old Siamese system of government, whereby outlying vassal states enjoyed virtual autonomy, was now untenable. As a consequence, Ubon was integrated into the modern nation-state being forged by King Chulalongkorn to meet the foreign threat, and came to be ruled from Bangkok. It is, however, unlikely that any more than a very few of the inhabitants of Ubon would have considered themselves part of anything as abstract as a nation. For most people, the village was their reality and its independence and prosperity the source of their self-respect. These peoples' overriding concern was the daily struggle to feed their families, and their local monastery was the only institution they trusted. It was in Bahn Kor, one such small village, a few kilometres to the south of Ubon town, that Luang Por Chah was born.

## II. GROWING UP

### CHAH CHUANGCHOT

Luang Por Chah was born on the seventh waning day of the seventh moon of the Year of the Horse, 1918. He was the fifth of eleven children born to Mah and Pim Chuangchot, who, like the vast majority of their generation, were subsistence rice farmers. The name 'Chah' means 'clever, capable, resourceful'.

In accordance with custom, Luang Por's mother gave birth to him kneeling, her arms above her head, grasping a rope suspended from the rafters of the house. Afterwards, she endured fifteen days of confinement, lying with her stomach as close as possible to a charcoal brazier to 'dry out' her womb – an ancient custom that still survived in the countryside despite, some seventy years previously, King Mongkut railing against it as 'this senseless and monstrous crime of having women smoked and roasted'. In his first months after weaning, Luang Por's mother would have fed him

by chewing and masticating sticky rice in her own mouth and then gently spooning it into his.

Luang Por was born into an affectionate and respected household, one of the wealthier families in a closely knit community. The Isan villages of those days, isolated by forests and vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather and the caprice of spirits, put great store on sharing, generosity and harmony. The model was of extended families living together or in adjoining houses, and over generations almost everybody in a village would be related at one remove or another with everybody else. Houses were made of wood, roofed with grass-thatch and raised on stilts as protection from floods and wild animals. They were placed close together with no fixed boundaries between them. Life was conducted on a large, open space upstairs, with rooms used only for sleeping. People not only heard their neighbours' family dramas, they could see them as well. There was no concept of privacy, much less a desire for it. The villagers subscribed to respect for monks, elders and spirits. They valued consideration for the feelings of others and a healthy sense of shame.\* And they relished laughter and conversation. Luang Por grew up with a strong sense of community and place, and 'the gift of the gab'.

The adjective that was often used to describe Luang Por in his later years – ebullient – is the one that comes most readily to mind when picturing him as a child. He had an outgoing, sunny and occasionally exuberant disposition, but also possessed a keen, observant eye – he was nobody's fool. Luang Por bore the round face and flat 'lion's nose' common to his race. More distinctively, his mouth was unusually wide and compelling. In contrast to the powerful symmetry of his face, his right ear was slightly larger than the left. He was acknowledged as the natural leader of his group of friends. Companions remembered him as the one whom everyone wanted to be close to and without whom all games and adventures seemed dull. They recalled his even temper. They said he never enforced his dominance with bullying or coercion, and that no one could recall him in a fight. He was more likely to be a mediator in his companions' disputes. And, from an early age, he was drawn by the yellow robe.

\*In Thailand, the word 'shame' means something slightly different from that generally understood in Western cultures. See page 223, 'Hiri and Ottappa'.

In later years, he related childhood memories of dressing up as a monk. He said he would sit sternly on an old bamboo bed with his *khaoma* cloth\* draped over his left shoulder like a robe, while his friends played the parts of the laity. He remembered enacting the daily meal offering – presumably the only event in the monks' daily life that lent itself to drama. Luang Por would ring a bell and his friends would carry plates of fruit and cool water towards him. After bowing three times, they would offer it to him meekly; in return, he would give them the Five Precepts \*\* and a blessing.

Isan culture lacks a hard and fast distinction between the ideas of work and play. The word '*ngan*' expresses this fluidity well, meaning both 'work' and also 'festival, ceremony or fair'. Children brought up in the villages of Isan have always been taught to take on responsibilities from an early age – in the fields, in the house and in raising younger siblings. For the most part, they seem to possess a natural talent for enjoying their duties. In Luang Por's day, children's main job would be taking the family's water buffaloes out to graze. They would also help in the search for extra food. Although mushroom gathering was a favourite occupation after rainfall, catching small creatures for the evening meal was the most common task. It may seem surprising that the devoutly Buddhist Isan villagers should be so ready to take life. The harshness of the environment undoubtedly played a part. Hunting was also a part of their culture that pre-existed their adoption of Buddhism by thousands of years, and which they never fully abandoned. Whatever the case, the Isan villagers ate living creatures without distinction. Insects, lizards, beetles – nothing was spared.

After reading accounts of Isan village life in the early twentieth century, it is easy to imagine the boy Chah in the hot season, riding a placid water buffalo out to pasture early in the morning; or in the stifling heat of midday, see him sitting in the shade of a mango tree singing snatches of popular songs, munching lazily on a mango, or taking a nap. During a rainy season downpour, as a boisterous group of young lads chase after

\* An all-purpose piece of cloth used by Thai males. It measures approximately two metres by one, and is usually covered in a bright checkered pattern. It is used as a sarong, a bathing cloth, a towel, a shawl, a turban, for carrying things and even as a hammock.

\*\* See Glossary, 808.

frogs and toads, he is surely the one in the lead, roaring at the top of his voice. In the cold season, he is on another hunting expedition; with friends watching from below, he climbs up a tree grasping a long stick whose ends are smeared with viscous jackfruit sap, and touches the backs of the cicadas congregating on the cool windblown branches. As he puts his prizes in a lidded basket to take home for dinner, he puts one or two aside for blasting the eardrum of an unwary companion.

Although these scenes have a definite charm to them, Luang Por believed that they bore an unseen shadow. In later years, he said that many of the illnesses that afflicted him throughout his life were the kammic consequences of casual cruelties he had inflicted on living creatures as a boy.

#### DEKWAT

By the 1920s, some thirty years after its inception, a State education system had still made few inroads into rural Isan. During Luang Por's childhood, three years of primary education were available, but they were not compulsory and few parents saw their worth. Luang Por, by the age of nine, had completed a single year.

Education of the young had traditionally been one of the major functions of the village monastery. Putting aside the glaring weakness that fifty percent of children – the girls – were excluded, the results were impressive. Foreign observers had often expressed surprise at the high standard of literacy amongst Thai men (at the same time, interestingly enough, as praising what they saw as the superior shrewdness and industry of the women). The boys would help out with the monastery chores, and through daily personal contact with the monks and participating in the life of the wat\*, they received an education with a strong moral and spiritual foundation. It was a system that forged strong links between the monastery and the village, and it has been argued that the loss of this educational role to the State was a body blow to the rural Sangha's sense of purpose from which it has never fully recovered.

\*The Thai word for a Buddhist temple or monastery. Throughout this book, this word will be used interchangeably with these two English terms.

It was at the age of nine that Luang Por asked permission from his parents to move out of the family home and into the local monastery. It was a common practice for parents to entrust a son to the monks but rare for a boy to volunteer. Many years later, Luang Por spoke of his decision in the following way:

Well, the causes and conditions were there. As a boy, I had a fear of committing evil actions. I was always a straightforward lad. I was honest, and I didn't tell lies. When there were things to be shared out, I was considerate, I would take less than my due. That basic nature just kept maturing until one day I said to myself, 'Go to the monastery.' I asked my friends if they had ever thought of doing the same thing and none of them had. The idea just arose naturally. I'd say it was the fruit of past actions. As time went on, wholesome qualities steadily grew inside me until one day they led me to decide and do as I did.

On another occasion, in a more humorous vein, Luang Por told some lay disciples that he had become a *dekwat* (monastery child) because he was tired of watering the family tobacco fields. He said that the more he rebelled against his chores, the more his parents had given him, afraid that he would turn out badly. As one of Luang Por's sisters remembered it, a small accident brought things to a head:

"Him going to live in the monastery wasn't arranged by our parents; it was his own idea. One day he was helping his brothers and sisters pounding rice, but he wasn't putting much effort into it. Well, it so happened the pounder slipped out, and we had to drive in a wedge to keep it firm. He wouldn't help. But then while the rest of us were doing it, he got hit by the wood we were using as a mallet. It must have hurt him because he got angry and shouted out, 'That's it! I'm going to go and be a monk!'"

Luang Por's parents took him to the local village monastery. Wat Bahn Kor was situated in a large sandy enclosure shaded by coconut palms, mango trees and tamarinds, and consisted of a Dhamma Hall, a monks' dormitory

and a water-ringed Uposatha Hall. Por Mah and Mae Pim<sup>\*</sup> entrusted their son to the abbot with a predictable mixture of sadness and pride – and Luang Por was now a dekwat. But this was not the beginning of a long and painful separation from his parents: by no means had Luang Por withdrawn into a secluded and cloistered realm. The boundaries between the monastery and the surrounding world were marked, not by imposing walls, but by a rather half-hearted bamboo fence. Indeed, the monastery was the central focus of the communal life of the village rather than a refuge from it. In a sense, he had entered the world rather than left it.

#### MONASTERIES IN A NUTSHELL

From early days in the history of Buddhism, there have been those who wished to live a monastic life but felt unable to withstand the rigours of the peripatetic forest-dwelling regime which had been the norm in the first phase of the Buddha's teaching career. Even during the Buddha's lifetime, monasteries began to spring up on the edge of towns and villages. Many monks frowned upon this development. They felt that such monasteries were situated too close to the corrupting influences of the world. On the other hand, it could not be denied that such monasteries met a need.

As Buddhism spread throughout India and beyond, the number of monks choosing to follow a more academic vocation was swelled by elderly monks and those too poor in health to live in the deep forest. At the same time, lay Buddhists were desiring to feel the presence of the Sangha<sup>\*\*</sup> more tangibly in their midst. The forest monks were revered for their piety, but seemed too remote. The villagers and town-dwellers wanted monks nearby as examples and guides in their daily life and also to play a more prominent role in traditional ceremonies and the community's social life. Over the course of time, the urban monks assumed an active and increasingly secular role that drifted from the original ideal of the

<sup>\*</sup>Literally: ‘Father Mah and Mother Pim’. When Luang Por grew up, surnames had only very recently been adopted in Thailand. Generally, people would be referred to by their given name, prefaced by a familial honorific.

<sup>\*\*</sup>The capitalized word ‘Sangha’ is used in this book according to the traditional convention, that is, as referring solely to the monastic order.

*bhikkhu*<sup>\*</sup>, but was indispensable in the creation of a society that conceived itself as Buddhist.

In the mid-thirteenth century, the town of Sukhothai, formerly one of the northern outposts of the Angkor Empire, became the site of the first independent Thai kingdom. By that time, the ancient Mon Theravada tradition dominant in Sukhothai had been compromised rather than enriched by its encounter with other traditions. To the dynamic and conquering Thais, the Buddhism of Sukhothai must have presented a rather tired and worn demeanour – a noble tradition that had lost its sense of direction. King Ramkhamhaeng turned instead to the lineage of forest monks introduced into Southern Thailand from Sri Lanka – then the flourishing centre of the Theravada world – in order to revitalize the spiritual life of his kingdom.

These forest monks were proficient in both the Pali scriptures and the traditional meditation practices. They possessed the purity, integrity and freshness on which the religious life of a new self-confident Buddhist nation could be founded. The King built a monastery for them on one of the hills overlooking the city from the west, and every Lunar Observance Day (*Wan Phra*)<sup>\*\*</sup> he would ride out on his white elephant, head of a large and magnificent procession, to take the precepts and listen to a sermon. Through the support of the King and his court, the ideal of the forest monk was exalted.

Over the centuries, however, with the gradual decline of Sukhothai and the growth and expansion of Siamese power further south in Ayutthaya, it was the monasteries of the towns and villages which came to dominate. As the Sangha's role in society broadened and became more entrenched, so too did it become increasingly institutionalized. Given the immense prestige of the Sangha, it was inevitable that the king should seek to control it. A system of administration was established in which those

<sup>\*</sup>A Buddhist monk. Literally: ‘one who eats alms (*bhikkhā*)’.

<sup>\*\*</sup>‘Wan Phra’ can be literally translated as ‘Holy Day’ and may be compared to the Christian Sabbath. It does not, however, fall on a particular day of the week. It is determined by the lunar calendar and falls on the eighth and fifteenth (full moon) day of the waxing moon, and the eighth and fourteenth or fifteenth (dark moon) day of the waning moon. Henceforth, this book will follow the convention of Luang Por Chah’s overseas Sangha and refer to it as ‘Observance Day’.

exerting power were chosen by the king. A monastic life became a viable career as well as a vocation. Power, wealth, rank and fame were now available to the career monk and periods of corruption in the Sangha alternated with bursts of reform. During this period, temporary spells in the monkhood came to be expected of every young man, and it was understandable that the majority of these short-term monks would prefer to stay in a more comfortable monastery close to home than in a distant and inhospitable forest where they might fall prey to spirits, wild animals and racking fevers.

All such developments tended to marginalize the forest monks. From their former pre-eminence, the forest Sangha became an insignificant force. Forest monks were mistrusted by the authorities, feared and mythologized by the villagers, and known for their purported psychic powers rather than their devotion to the Buddha's system of mind training. At the same time, the village monasteries became an intrinsic part of people's lives. The local monastery gave the village its identity, an affiliation with the unseen powers of the universe, a sense of continuity through change.

Few of the images that the word 'monastery' is likely to evoke in a Western mind would agree with the reality of a village wat in rural Thailand. It might be the abode of monks, but it was considered the property of all. The path in front of the Dhamma Hall was a public thoroughfare, and the monastery well was used by all the nearby houses. Important public meetings took place in the Dhamma Hall, which also acted as a hostel for passing travellers and was thus the centre for the reception and dissemination of news from other areas.

The monastery played a central role in the social life of the village. It was the site for the important festivals that punctuated the hard struggles of the year. With daily entertainments almost non-existent, everyone looked to the lively *ngan wat*, or monastery fairs, for excitement and fun. Some of the fairs were of specifically Buddhist significance (e.g. those marking the advent and end of the Rains Retreat, and the anniversary of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death). Others, like the Rocket Festival, were of a more earthy, animist character, presided over by the monks and framed by offerings of alms to them. But whatever the occasion, no *ngan* would be complete without the entertainments staged

in the monastery grounds: performance by *morlam* minstrels, stalls of special sweetmeats and noodles, shadow plays, boxing matches and fireworks. It was a time when the usually strict constraints of Isan village society were temporarily slackened, alcohol was recklessly consumed and, in the grounds of the monastery, having fun was the order of the day.

As for the monks, they were not an hereditary elite. In Thai Buddhism, temporary ordination had long been the norm and constituted a rite of passage for young men. It had thus always been easy to enter the monastic life and easy to disrobe. Leaving incurred no stigma: on disrobing a man would be referred to as '*Tid*', a respectful title derived from the Sanskrit '*pandita*' or sage. Indeed, a man who had never been a monk was considered immature (literally: 'unripe') and a far less attractive potential husband or son-in-law than one who had spent time in the robes. Customarily, the young men in a village would become monks for the duration of the annual three-month Rains Retreat\* period, but sometimes they would remain in robes for as long as two or three years. The result was a fluid monastic community in which a floating element of temporary monastics rubbed shoulders with a core of long-term monks. One of the great merits of the system was that, with every family having members who were, or had been monks, the close bond between village and monastery was constantly renewed.

The long-term monks would be few in number. They would almost all have been born and raised in the local village and would thus empathize deeply with the daily problems of the local people. They would take participation in village affairs seriously, sometimes as leaders in public works projects such as building bridges, or when needed, as the impartial adviser and referee in disagreements and disputes amongst the lay community. Historically, the wat was the centre of learning. Apart from their standing as members of the Sangha, the monks also enjoyed the extra prestige of being the most educated and knowledgeable people in the community. They would learn and transmit many skills such as carpentry, painting, decorative arts and tile- and brick-making. Some monks would be herbal

\* See Glossary, 818.

doctors and some, notwithstanding the prohibition in the Monks' Discipline (the Vinaya)<sup>\*</sup>, were astrologers.

Ideally at least, it was the monastery's religious role that was paramount. The monks were expected to be, as far as possible, the embodiment of the Buddha's teachings and to inspire by word and deed, moral and spiritual values. They were also called upon to perform traditional rituals and conduct ceremonies. They would be invited to local houses to chant blessings and sprinkle lustral water during marriages, house-warming parties, and times of sickness or ill-luck. At the death of a villager, they would be invited to chant the rather abstract and philosophical *Mātikā* verses, believed to be the teachings the Buddha gave to his mother in one of the heaven realms following her death.

Perhaps most significantly, the monastery was the centre for the making of merit, understood to be the lay Buddhist's most important religious activity. Merit (*puñña*) refers to goodness as a force for present and future happiness. A wise person makes merit through acts of charity, a moral life and the cultivation of peace and wisdom. As a result, he or she leads a successful and contented life and after death is reborn in a happy realm. Offerings of food and material support for the monastery have always been the most basic and popular form of merit-making. Although individual monks might not always be especially inspiring to the laity, they have been considered ennobled and empowered by the yellow robe they wear and thus able to act as 'fields of merit'. With the accumulation of merit seen to be the most important factor affecting people's present and future prosperity and well-being, it is easy to see why monasteries commanded such a central role in village life.

The abbot was usually the most powerful and respected figure in the village, combining the prestige of age, position and wisdom. Very little went on in the village without his knowledge and nothing significant without his approval. People would consult him on every subject from affairs of the heart to the buying of land. Kampon Boontawee's wonderfully evocative novel *Child of the Northeast* gives a memorable picture of one such abbot. The young boy Khun goes to the monastery for the first time

\*These two terms will be used interchangeably in the text. See Glossary, 825.

with his father to see the old abbot, Luang Por Ken, of whom he is mortally afraid. They arrive as the emaciated, black-toothed monk is speaking to a group of women – his robes ‘tattered and dark with age, the folded cloth that lay across one shoulder looking like the strip of cloth tied about the trunk of the ancient bodhi tree in the monastery yard’. The women have brought their sick children to be blessed.

“He bent forward again and blew once more on the head of the baby with the swollen face. Then he dipped his forefinger into a small pot of something black. Five or six women held their children up, and he gently touched their tongues with his blackened finger. He cleaned his finger, leaned back against his cushion, and spoke again in his deep rumbling voice: ‘You people come to me for everything. For mumps!’ He shook his head slowly. ‘Everybody who wants to become a monk comes to me, that I can understand. But also, everybody whose baby is sick, everybody who is building a new house, everybody who wants to get married. Everyone who wants to name a child, or who has the red eye disease, they all come to me. You people should think: If I die, then who is going to look after all these things? This year, I will be eighty-five years old.’ He was silent again for a moment, looking at the babies, then laughed quietly to himself, ‘Oh well, oh well.’”

Luang Por spent four years as a dekwat. During that time, he learned to read and write, helped with the sweeping and cleaning of the monastery, served the monks and gradually absorbed at least the ambience and flavour of the basic Buddhist teachings. His duties were not onerous and there was plenty of time for play with his fellow dekwat. Of these there was a constant supply, as it was customary for weary parents to send their unmanageable sons to the monastery to be cured of their wildness. Orphans, if there was no relation to take them, could always find a refuge with the monks. Apart from accepting boys for spiritual reasons, the monastery was also the local social welfare centre.

#### NOVICE BULLFROG

In the Monks’ Discipline, it is laid down that an aspirant must be twenty years of age before he can become a monk, but that a boy ‘old enough to scare crows’ can become a novice. Luang Por took the ‘Going Forth’

vows in March 1931. He was thirteen, and could probably have shooed off a raiding hawk. As a novice, Luang Por's sturdy frame and bulging belly together with his resonant voice earned him the nickname of 'Eung' or Bullfrog. Life carried on in almost the same relaxed fashion as it had when he was a simple temple boy, although wearing the robe conferred a higher status and increased expectations: at least in front of the laity a restrained demeanour was expected. This was not always so easy. One of his fellow novices recalled:

"Every now and again there'd be an invitation to chant in somebody's house, and he would break into giggles in the middle of the chanting. As soon as he started, that was it – we couldn't help ourselves, we had to join in. Sometimes, he'd even start laughing during the meal. He was always finding something funny."

Luang Por would spend time everyday walking up and down in the shade, memorizing the various Pali chants: the daily service, meal blessings, auspicious verses chanted at house warming parties and marriages, funeral chants and Dhamma reflections:

*Adhuvam jīvitam; dhuvam maranam; avassam mayā maritabbam.*

Life is uncertain; death is certain; I too will die.

He also completed the first of the three levels of the *Nak Tam* Dhamma Exams. It included sections on the Buddha's life and teachings, the code of Discipline and the history of Buddhism and provided a sound foundation of the core teachings. At other times, gardening and building projects served to work off teenage steam.

#### BACK TO THE WORLD

During his novice years, Luang Por's teacher and mentor was a monk called Ajahn Lang. In accordance with the reciprocal relationship laid down in the Vinaya texts, Ajahn Lang oversaw Luang Por's studies and Luang Por, in return, acted as his personal attendant. Every now and then in the evenings, Ajahn Lang would kindly accompany Luang Por on visits to his family – it would have been forbidden for a novice to go alone. Indeed, he seemed to enjoy these excursions even more than Luang Por,

exuding a confidence and charm amongst Luang Por's family that the young novice may well have found a little eccentric.

At Ajahn Lang's instigation, the visits became steadily more frequent and protracted. Sometimes it would be late at night before the two of them walked back to the monastery, accompanied by the barks of the village dogs their footsteps disturbed. One day, Ajahn Lang confided in Luang Por that he had decided to disrobe and suggested that his protégé might do likewise. A confused Luang Por agreed. He had been living in the wat for seven years and at the dangerous and wobbly age of sixteen, a small push was enough. Some days after the joint disrobing, Luang Por's parents were visited by elder relatives of ex-Ajahn Lang to discuss a marriage proposal. The ardent admirer of Luang Por's sister Sah, assured of her affections, was free at last to declare his love.

Luang Por went to work in the family fields. Inevitably, the novelty of mud and sweat soon wore off and, although he applied himself to the regular round of the rice farmer with a gusto that earned praise from his family, it seems that he bore quietly within himself a sense of something lost and unfulfilled. It was not an overpowering emotion – he was a buoyant, vigorous young man – but it was a constant, unobtrusive shadow which he could only try to ignore. For the moment, Luang Por was content to divert himself in the usual ways. Together with a small group of friends, he would walk to monastery fairs in neighbouring villages where they could all enjoy normal young men's pleasures, including flirting with the local girls.

By this time, Luang Por's remarkable powers of endurance were already beginning to manifest themselves – albeit in rather mundane matters. He and his friends might walk as much as fifteen kilometres to a monastery fair and then, late at night, walk all the way back. Some of the young men in their group, a little the worse for drink, might want to stop and sleep under a tree somewhere on the way, but Luang Por – his old companions remembered long afterwards – would always insist on walking the whole way home. He was, however, not without his weaknesses. Confident and self-assured as he seemed, Luang Por had a deep fear of ghosts. He could work all day and then walk all night if he chose to, but not through a spirit-thick forest alone. Luang Por's home was separated from his best friend

Phut's by such a stretch of haunted forest. If they arrived back late at night, Luang Por would sleep at his friend's house rather than go on alone.

## YOUNG LOVE

And then Luang Por fell in love with Phut's step-sister, Jai. He started spending more and more of his time in Phut's house, courting her. The custom of the day decreed that young couples should not be alone together and touching of any kind was taboo. The young man was to meet with his girl at her family home, upstairs on the porch in the evening, where she would be sitting demurely. Jai's parents seemed content enough with the prospective match: Luang Por was a friend of the family, good-natured, hard-working and honest, and perhaps more importantly, his family was wealthy enough to offer a good 'bride price'\*.

One evening, the young couple hatched a plan: they would marry as soon as Luang Por had completed his National Service and spent a Rains Retreat as a monk to make merit for his parents in the time-honoured way. At that time, Luang Por was eighteen years old and Jai seventeen. It would be another four years before they could even expect to hold hands.

As the rainy season approached, every household was busy preparing ploughs, rakes, hoes, yokes, fish traps and machetes for the upcoming work in the paddy fields. Luang Por had just taken out a load of tools to the family's small hut raised on stilts in the middle of their fields. You may imagine the scene: an overcast, oppressively humid sky and underneath it, a stocky young man with an unusually wide mouth, bare-chested, his khaoma cloth around his loins, bumping up and down on the uncomfortable wooden seat of an ox-cart as it jolts along a rutted lane between the vibrant green of the rice fields. He is about to receive devastating news. Luang Por related the story himself many years later:

When I was eighteen I liked a girl. She liked me too and, as these things go, I eventually fell in love. I wanted to marry her. I daydreamed about having her by my side helping me out in the fields, making a living together. Then one day on my way home

\*Unlike in most cultures, in Thailand, the gifts go from the groom's family to the bride's, rather than vice versa.

from work, I met my best friend, Phut, on the road. He said, ‘Chah, I’m taking the lady.’ When I heard those words, I went completely numb. I was in a state of shock for hours afterwards. I remembered the prediction of an astrologer that I would have no wife but many children. At that time, I wondered how it could be possible.

Simply, and with the unquestioned prerogative that parents of his age and culture possessed, Phut’s father and step-mother had decided that the two step-children should marry; there was no more to be said. The reasons were pragmatic, financial. If Phut married Jai, the family would be saved a bride price they could ill afford. They had just acquired land some distance from the village that should not be left fallow. The young couple could move out there and farm it together.

Luang Por, desolate, had no choice but to reconcile himself to the situation. It made no sense to be angry with Phut. His friend had not plotted behind his back and was painfully embarrassed by the whole affair. But this disappointment was a profound one, a sharp and hurtful lesson in the uncertainties that bedevil human affairs.

Luang Por did not give up on his friendship with Phut and, in fact, it was to last for the rest of his life. But with Jai, he had to be more circumspect: he could not force his feelings for her to disappear by an act of will. As a young monk, if he saw Jai in the monastery, he would do his upmost to avoid an encounter that might stir up difficult emotions. Luang Por admitted that for the first seven years of his monkhood, he found it impossible to completely let go of his thoughts of this young woman. At this early stage of his monastic life, Luang Por, like a great many young monks through the ages, must have been assailed by fantasies featuring tantalizing scenarios and miraculous happy endings that, when coolly considered, he did not truly desire. It was only when he finally left his familiar surroundings and through meditation practice gained a method of stilling his thoughts and seeing them in perspective, that the fantasies faded.

In later years as abbot of Wat Pah Pong, describing to the monks the drawbacks of sensual desire, he would often talk of the debt of gratitude

he owed to Phut, ‘If he hadn’t married Mae Jai, then I probably wouldn’t be here today.’ Perhaps this is so; but at the same time, it seems safe to assume that if he had not met this particular obstacle to a conventional married life, another would surely have emerged. In a recorded talk decades later, Luang Por revealed:

I was fed up. I didn’t want to live with my parents. The more I thought about it, the more fed up I became. I just wanted to go off by myself the whole time – although where to I had no idea. I felt like that for a number of years. I was fed up, but not with anything in particular. I just wanted to go somewhere and be alone. These were the feelings I had before I became a monk. I wasn’t always fully conscious of them, but they were there all the same, all of the time.

Luang Por only ever mentioned two other incidents occurring in his relations with the opposite sex. In the first, an ex-monk, with whom Luang Por had been friendly during his years as a novice, died at an early age and Luang Por assisted the bereaved family throughout the days of the funeral proceedings. On the night of the cremation, after the last guests had returned to their homes, Luang Por, as a close family friend, felt concerned that the widow and her children would feel lonely and desolate if left alone. He offered to stay on for a couple of nights to keep them company in their grief. On the second night, Luang Por became aware that the lady of the house had come out of the bedroom and had laid down beside him. She took his hand and started to guide it over her body. Luang Por pretended to be asleep. Finding no response, the lady got up and slipped quietly back into her room.

In later years, Luang Por was to admit that sexual desire was the one defilement which he had great difficulty in overcoming. But here, in a situation that bore all the elements of adolescent fantasy, and unbound by vows of celibacy, he was remarkably restrained. The reason may have been fear or lack of physical attraction. In view of his later struggles, however, it is more likely that Luang Por’s sense of propriety and his respect for a dead friend overcame desire.

It was not unusual for young Thai men of Luang Por's generation to end an evening out with a visit to a brothel. It was quite natural then that his second and final close encounter with a woman occurred in one such establishment in the backstreets of the local town of Warin. The incident occurred shortly before he became a monk when Luang Por's old friends managed to persuade him that, before renouncing the pleasures of the flesh, he should at least first sample their delights. In the end, it was not to be. Once alone in a room with the young woman he had chosen to help him lose his virginity, Luang Por could not help but notice through the thick powder on her face the ravages of acne. An uncontrollable disgust arose within him. He got up abruptly, and the next thing he knew, he was standing at a street-side food stall with a bowl of noodles in his hand. If it was a debacle, then it was one which most aptly, and rather comically, foreshadowed the struggles of the next few years. As a young village monk, the only desire that could match Luang Por's sexual lust was a craving for Chinese noodles – a craving so strong that it led him to sneak out of the wat to his favourite vendor on more than one occasion.

## ORDINATION

By now it may be apparent that there is a dearth of verifiable biographical information about Luang Por's youth. The full extent of what is known about his early life has been gleaned from a small number of reminiscences from old friends and family members, private asides recollected by his close disciple Ajahn Jun, and a few passages taken from Dhamma talks. The rest, especially indications of the evolution of his inner life, will always remain opaque.

What is known is that by the time Luang Por discovered that he would not be called up for National Service and so was free to take Ordination, his views about monkhood had changed. He no longer considered it simply in terms of making merit for his parents, as an expression of the gratitude he felt towards them. While that was certainly an admirable aim, he now saw that life as a monk might be able to resolve the lack of peace and meaning in his life. The world was a hollow, tedious place, full of vicissitudes; perhaps the monastic life could lead him to something better. He decided to become a monk for an indefinite period. His mother and father

were pleased. They had enough children to help with the farm work, and it was auspicious to have a son in robes. The Ordination ceremony (*Upasampadā*) took place on the twenty-sixth of April, 1939, at Wat Kor Nai, the local ordination monastery, on a hot, shimmering afternoon. Phra Khru Indarasāraguṇa was Luang Por's preceptor and conferred on him the monk's name of 'Subhaddo', meaning 'well-developed'.

Luang Por spent the first two years of his life as a monk at Wat Bahn Kor, the monastery where he had been a novice, studying the teachings and preparing to retake the first level Nak Tam Exams\*.

When I first became a monk I didn't train myself, but I had faith – maybe I was born with it, I don't know. At the end of the Rains Retreat, the monks and novices who joined the Sangha at the same time as me all disrobed. I thought, 'What's wrong with them?' But I didn't dare to say anything because I still didn't trust my feelings. My friends were excited at leaving, but to me they seemed foolish. I considered how difficult it was to enter the Sangha and how easy to disrobe. I thought how lacking in merit they must be to look on the worldly path as more beneficial than that of Dhamma. That's how I looked at it; but I said nothing, I kept my thoughts to myself.

I'd watch my fellow monks and novices come and go. Sometimes, before they disrobed, they'd try on their lay clothes and parade up and down. I thought they were completely insane. But they thought they looked good, that their clothes were smart, and they talked about the things they were going to do after they disrobed. I didn't dare to tell them that they'd got it all wrong, because I didn't know how durable my own faith was.

After my friends disrobed, I became resigned. 'You're on your own now', I said to myself. I pulled out my copy of the *Pātimokkha*\*\* and started to memorize it. It was easier than before with nobody teasing me or fooling around. I was able to concen-

\* Although Luang Por had passed this preliminary level as a novice, it was customary to retake it once one ordained as a monk.

\*\* The 227 training rules of the Buddhist monk in the original Pali language.

trate on it fully. I didn't say anything, but I made a resolution that from that day onwards until the end of my life, whether it be at the age of seventy or eighty or whenever, I would try to practise\* with a constant appreciation, to not allow my efforts to slacken or my faith to weaken, to be consistent. That is an extreme thing to do and I didn't dare to tell anyone else. People came and went, and I said nothing. I merely watched impassively. But in my mind, I was thinking, 'They don't see clearly.'

However, Luang Por had his own problems in those early days: food became an obsession.

Practising Dhamma is no smooth ride. You suffer. The first and second years are especially hard. The young monks and the small novices really go through it. I myself suffered a lot. If you've got a problem with food, it's rough. I became a monk when I was twenty. That's the age when – who can deny it? – you really enjoy food and sleep. Sometimes, I'd just sit there quietly dreaming about things I'd like to eat: pounded *tanee* bananas, green papaya salad, all kinds of things! The saliva would be flowing like a river in my mouth.

After completing his examination, Luang Por decided to leave in search of a more academic atmosphere than his home monastery could provide. In 1941, he resided in Wat Suansawan about fifty kilometres to the east of Bahn Kor and continued his studies at nearby Wat Po Tak.

These were the war years. Thailand, officially at least, was an ally of Japan, and Ubon had recently been bombed by the French. Food and everyday necessities were in short supply and the requisites at Wat Po Tak, where the Sangha was large, were barely adequate. Luang Por could endure the conditions, but he found the standard of teaching there disappointing, and after a single Rains Retreat, he set off with a companion to a neighbouring district in order to continue his studies at Wat Bahn Nong Lak. He had heard many monks praise the teaching abilities of the abbot of this

\*Following the Thai usage of the word 'patipad' as exemplified here, the noun 'practice' and the verb 'practise' are used throughout this book as shorthand for 'cultivation of the Noble Eightfold Path'.

monastery and found it to be deserved. However, when his friend found the summer heat and scanty food at the monastery too taxing, Luang Por agreed to move with him to another monastery in a nearby town. There he studied for the second level of the Nak Tam exams and embarked on the somewhat rather dry study of Pali grammar. After passing the exam in 1943, Luang Por returned to Wat Bahn Nong Lak.

It was a year in which he concentrated all his considerable energies on studying for the third and final Nak Tam exam and continuing with his Pali grammar. For the first time, Luang Por had found a gifted teacher who inspired him with confidence and respect, and his studies progressed smoothly.

Towards the end of that year, Luang Por received dismaying news: his father had fallen seriously ill. Luang Por's exams were to take place shortly and if he went home now, a whole year's work would be wasted. Should he chance it and take his exams before going home? It was no choice at all: he only had one father, and exams could wait another year. He rushed home as soon as he could to find his father's condition in steady decline.

Luang Por's father, Por Mah, was proud to have a son in the robes and whenever Luang Por visited home would always encourage him in his efforts and make a request:

“Please don't disrobe, Venerable Sir. I invite you to remain as a monk indefinitely.”

This is a deliberately literal translation. It is hard to convey in the English language the tenor of a conversation between a Thai monk and his parents. Filial piety is greatly emphasized in Thai culture and the relationship between parents and children is generally warm and close. Yet when the son becomes a monk, their way of relating to each other instantly and radically changes. The parents are now laypeople. They sit on a lower seat, at a respectful distance. They use monastic honorifics when referring to their son and humble personal pronouns when referring to themselves. To an observer from another culture, this formality might, at first, seem odd or perhaps unnatural. But for the family itself, it is simply the accepted convention. The stilted speech forms help everyone

to remember that while the son's identity as a monk has not erased his identity as a member of his family, it has transformed it.

Now as he lay weak and shrunken on his deathbed, Por Mah made the request one last time:

"You've made the right choice. Don't change it. Lay life is full of so many kinds of suffering and difficulties. There's no real peace or contentment in it. Remain as a monk."

On previous occasions, Luang Por had always kept silent, his head slightly bowed, showing respect but an unwillingness to make such a commitment. This time, however, he replied:

No, I won't disrobe. Why would I do that?

His father's face relaxed into a warm, contented smile, and he drifted into sleep.

When Por Mah discovered that Luang Por's exams would take place shortly, he urged him to return to his wat, but this request was refused. Instead, Luang Por helped to nurse his father for the thirteen more days and nights that he lingered on. It was December, when the days have a drained, subdued tone and a cold wind blows down through Isan from China; when first thing in the morning, everyone lights fires outside their houses to warm themselves; and jews harp kites anchored high in the air utter their melancholy cry, 'tuytuy tuytuy' throughout the night. One day at the end of the year, Por Mah's life came to its end.

#### A SOLEMN RESOLVE

In the period following his father's death, Luang Por's monastic life began to follow a new direction. The change was almost certainly precipitated by his loss. Having for some years steeped himself in Buddhist texts analysing the human condition in general terms, he had come face-to-face with mortality on its most personal level. The human body as a mere conglomeration of the elements of solidity, fluidity, heat and vibration; the inevitability of old age, sickness, death and of the separation from all we love – prominent features of passages learned by rote in the wat – must have acquired much deeper meaning for him. Seeing his father in

pain before death, helping place his lifeless body in the coffin, watching it burn on the funeral pyre, gathering the bones remaining in the cremation ashes – all would have made a profound impression on the young monk.

Many years later, Luang Por recalled that on returning to Wat Bahn Nong Lak after his father's funeral, he made a solemn resolve:

I dedicate my body and mind, my whole life, to the practice of the Lord Buddha's teachings in their entirety. I will realize the truth in this lifetime ... I will let go of everything and follow the teachings. No matter how much suffering and difficulty I have to endure I will persevere, otherwise there will be no end to my doubts. I will make this life as even and continuous as a single day and night. I will abandon attachments to mind and body and follow the Buddha's teachings until I know their truth for myself.

As a result, Luang Por started practising meditation more seriously. But not without difficulties.

The first year of meditation I got nothing from it. My mind just teemed with thoughts about things I wanted to eat; it was really hopeless. Sometimes during a meditation session, it would be as if I was actually eating a banana. I could feel it in my mouth ... The defilements have been in the mind for many lifetimes. When you come to discipline it, there's bound to be a struggle.

It was during this year of 1944 that Luang Por's mother, Mae Pim, had a vivid dream in which two of her teeth fell out. She later remembered that in her dream her immediate dismay at this loss was cut short by a voice saying, 'Never mind. Don't worry about those teeth; they will be replaced by teeth of gold.' She woke up putting a hand instinctively to her mouth. Some days later, at the foot of the steps leading up to her house, she discovered a sprouting tree growing at an uncanny speed. It was a bodhi tree, the same species as that under which the Buddha realized awakening. When she approached the abbot of the monastery for advice, he told her that it was an auspicious omen. The most appropriate thing to do would be to replant the tree in the monastery. He said that the magical appearance of a bodhi tree in front of Mae Pim's house meant that a great being would appear in her family.

At the same time as making his first fledgling attempts at meditation, Luang Por carried on his study of Pali in the time-honoured way – translating Dhammapada\* commentary stories into Thai. He could not help but notice the disparity between his own life and those of the monks in the Buddha's time: they wandered in the jungles 'solitary, ardent and resolute', whereas he was poring over books in a monastery schoolroom. Having made a resolution to dedicate his life to the monastic order, the question before him was to decide in exactly which way he should live that life. He decided that the answer was to make a fresh start, to abandon his studies, and to devote himself wholeheartedly to 'the path of practice'; in other words, to become a forest monk. The next step was to look for guidance.

At that time, Isan was still both thickly forested and thinly populated. There were few roads and little traffic. The only way that one was likely to hear of a good teacher was by word of mouth, perhaps from a passing *tudong*\*\* monk. The forest masters were few and far between and cherished their anonymity. Despite having been a member of the Sangha for seven years, Luang Por's decision to take up meditation, to become what was called a 'practice monk', was not as straightforward as might be imagined. He opted to return to Wat Bahn Kor while he decided on his next move.

As it happened, Wat Pah Saensamran, a forest monastery established by disciples of Luang Pu Mun, Luang Por's eventual teacher, lay just a few kilometres from Bahn Kor on the edge of the town of Warin. But as it was a monastery of a different monastic lineage, he did not, at that time, consider it as an option. After a visit to a forest monastery in Det Udom District in the hot season had ended in disappointment, Luang Por's nascent plans were overtaken by the rains. He spent the retreat at Wat Bahn Kor helping to teach the first level Nak Tam course to the young monks and novices. His students showed little enthusiasm for their studies. They attended the classes in a merely perfunctory way, lazy and

\*The Dhammapada is a collection of teachings of the Buddha in verse form. Stories purporting to give the background leading up to the utterance of each verse were composed sometime after the Buddha's death.

\*\*A wandering monk keeping various optional ascetic practices. The word 'tudong' will be described in greater detail in the following section.

disrespectful. It was the final confirmation of the unsatisfactoriness of the life he had led for seven years. In December, Luang Por took the third, and final, level of the Nak Tam course and prepared for a new Going Forth.



Just as there is very little material on which to base the story of Luang Por's early life, there is also a frustrating lack of available information about the following, most formative years of his life. The whole chronology of events presented here, dating from Luang Por's departure from Ubon at the beginning of 1947 until his establishment of Wat Pah Pong in mid-1954, is necessarily a tentative one, being largely the result of detective work and inference. One date, however, can be asserted with real confidence, and thus used as an anchor for all the others. Luang Por once mentioned that the year he spent the Rains Retreat with his teacher Luang Pu Kinaree was one in which the lunar calendar is adjusted to synchronize with the solar calendar by adding an extra month. As this event occurs only once every three years, it can only be 1948.

### III. THE PATH OF PRACTICE

#### A NEW GOING FORTH

'*Tudong*' is a Thai word derived from the Pali '*dhutaṅga*'\*, which means 'to wear away' and is the name given to the thirteen ascetic practices the Buddha permitted monks to undertake in order to intensify their efforts to wear away their defilements. In Thailand, the word has expanded in meaning. Monks who have left their monastery and are wandering through the countryside sleeping rough (usually practising a number of the *dhutaṅga* observances), are called '*tudong* monks' and are said to be '*on tudong*'.

At the beginning of 1947, accompanied by a friend, Ven. Tawan, Luang Por set off on *tudong* – a long trek westwards towards central Thailand. The two monks walked barefooted. They carried their iron bowls in a cloth bag

\*See Glossary, 806.

on one shoulder and their *glots* (umbrella-tent)\* on the other. Villages were rare and beyond the cultivated area that surrounded them – now tired and dry after the harvest – the rutted tracks they walked along were often overgrown. It must have been a harsh baptism into the tudong life for Luang Por and his companion. Although the days might have been hot, nights on the forest floor would have been chilling and their one daily meal austere.

The Buddha did not want his monks to be self-sufficient hermits. He laid down a number of rules in the Monks' Discipline aimed at ensuring that they had daily contact with the lay community. Monks cannot dig the earth, pick the fruit from trees, keep food overnight or cook. They may eat only that food which has been offered directly into their hands or bowl. The tudong monk goes on alms-round early in the morning, eats whatever he needs in one sitting from his bowl, and relinquishes whatever is left. Therefore, if he wants to eat – and he usually has a good appetite after walking the whole previous day – he has to make sure that he spends the night within easy walking distance of a village.

In the mornings, as Luang Por and Ven. Tawan passed through the ragged hamlets of Sisaket and Surin, villagers would have rushed out excitedly to put food in their bowls. But it would be mainly lumps of plain sticky rice that the two monks received, and rarely more than a few chillies or a banana to eat with it. The villagers were poor and being caught unprepared, they had little close at hand to offer to the lean, dark monks that suddenly appeared out of the forest, walking slowly past their houses, heads bowed, silent as ghosts. Gradually, the two monks got used to eating a big lump of sticky rice as their daily meal – the dry heat in their throats and lead weight in their bellies staved off hunger if nothing else. They settled into a steady schedule of walking and would cover some twenty-five kilometres a day, usually in single file, trying to still the stubbornly rebellious thoughts that surged into their minds as they walked. In the evening, they would look for a stream to bathe in, rinse out their sweat-

\* A *glot* is a hand-made umbrella with a hook on top, which is suspended from a line strung between two trees. A cylindrical mosquito net is hung from the umbrella creating a make-shift tent. See Appendix I.

soaked under robes and, having put up their glot under a tree, spend the night practising meditation.

Their first major test was the notorious Dong Phaya Yen, a huge and dense forest that had, until recent years, virtually isolated the Isan plateau from the rest of the country. By this time, although its wild elephants, tigers and boars were rarely seen on the cart tracks along which the two monks were walking, malarial mosquitos were a constant threat: the laying of the railway line to Isan a few years previously had cost many lives. Poisonous snakes abounded, particularly cobras and the placid but highly venomous banded krait. In the evenings, after putting up their glots, the two monks would chant verses of protection. Sitting under a tree in the darkness, every sound seemed significant and threatening. Even if the larger beasts left them alone, they were aware that a bite from one of the centipedes or scorpions in the dead leaves around them would mean an agonizing and sleepless night.

Eventually, Luang Por and Ven. Tawan emerged unharmed from the jungle into the dry rice fields of Saraburi. From there, they made their way northwards to the province of Lopburi and Wat Khao Wongkot – the monastery of Luang Por Pao, a forest monk renowned for his meditation prowess.

Their destination proved to be a steep-sided and rock-strewn hill honeycombed with caves in which the resident monks dwelled on simple wooden platforms. A modest wooden Dhamma Hall and a kitchen nestled among the trees above them were the only visible signs of habitation as they climbed a well-swept path up the hill. The raucous sound of the cicadas that greeted them, rather than detracting from the silence, seemed somehow to be its voice.

Disappointment awaited them however: they were informed by a resident monk that Luang Por Pao had passed away a few months prior to their arrival. They were given permission to stay for a while to rest after their journey and to decide on their next move. It was the first time that they had lived in a forest monastery, and they soon realized that, even without its teacher, there was much here that they could learn from.

The textbook definition of a ‘forest monastery’ is any monastery (even, theoretically, one completely devoid of trees) situated at least five hundred bow-lengths (approximately one kilometre) from the nearest village. The forest monastery’s relative seclusion is intended to provide an environment in which its inhabitants may live in a way resembling that of the monks in the Buddha’s time, focusing their efforts on the training of body, speech and mind that leads to enlightenment. To maintain this focus, Thai forest monasteries do not emphasize academic study and they restrict their contacts with the local lay community. The rationale of the forest monastery is that it is only through monastics realizing the various stages of enlightenment that the essence of Buddhism can be safeguarded and authentically transmitted from one generation to the next.

It was precisely in search of such a monastery that Luang Por had come so far, and he felt inspired by the diligence and gentle aloofness of the monks of Wat Khao Wongkot. Luang Por was keen to learn about the way of practice that Luang Por Pao had established, to study the teachings that the master had written on the cave walls and to continue his study of the Vinaya. It was with these considerations in mind that Luang Por and Ven. Tawan asked for and were granted permission to spend their first Rains Retreat as tudong monks at Wat Khao Wongkot.

A prominent characteristic of Luang Por’s practice (and in later years, of his teachings) was the emphasis that he placed on adherence to the Monks’ Discipline. His frustration with the ignorance and lack of interest that his fellow monks showed towards the Vinaya contributed significantly to his decision to leave the village monastic system. He had long been fascinated by the study of the Vinaya, but it was only after setting off on tudong that he felt free to approach it as a practical code by which to live the monks’ life. He began to devote himself to an intense scrutiny of the two most detailed texts available – the classic fifth-century manual *The Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*) and the nineteenth-century Thai commentary *Pubbasikkhāvāññanā*. These two works, especially the latter, tackle subtle (arguably nit-picking) details of the rules in an antique, dusty prose that would tax the enthusiasm of all but the most ardent. Luang Por studied them avidly, almost to obsession.

## SEEING THE DANGER

That year, 1947, Wat Khao Wongkot also played host to a senior monk, originally from Cambodia, who was to leave a deep impression on Luang Por. This monk possessed the distinction of being proficient in both the academic study of Buddhist doctrine and the practice of meditation – an unusual accomplishment in Thailand where an unfortunate split had long existed between the scholar-monks and the meditators. For the most part, the scholars did not meditate and the meditators did not study; consequently, neither group held the other in very high esteem. However, this monk (whose name has not been recorded and henceforth will be referred to as Ajahn Khe) was blessed with a remarkable memory for the intricacies of the Discipline and profundities of the Discourses (Suttas)\*. At the same time, he adhered to the life of a tudong monk, most at ease surrounded by the natural silence of forests, mountains and caves.

One night during the retreat, there occurred an incident that Luang Por found so inspiring that, years later, he would often relate it to his disciples. Ajahn Khe had kindly offered to help Luang Por with his study of the Vinaya. Following a long and fruitful session one late afternoon, Luang Por, having taken his daily bath at the well, climbed up the hill to practise meditation on its cool, breezy ridge. Sometime after ten o'clock, Luang Por was practising walking meditation when he heard the sound of cracking twigs and someone or something moving towards him in the darkness. At first, he assumed it was a creature out hunting for its dinner, but as the sound got closer he made out the form of Ajahn Khe emerging from the forest.

*Luang Por:* Ajahn, what brings you up here so late at night?

*Ajahn Khe:* I explained a point of Vinaya to you incorrectly today.

*Luang Por:* You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble just for that, sir.  
You don't have a light to show the way; it could have waited until tomorrow.

\*The Dhamma teachings of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali Canon. In this book, these two terms are used interchangeably.

*Ajahn Khe:* No, it could not. Suppose for some reason or other I was to die tonight and in future, you were to teach other people what I explained to you. It would be bad *kamma*\* for me and for many others.

Ajahn Khe carefully explained the point again and once he was certain that it had been clearly understood, returned into the night. Luang Por had often noted the phrase in the texts describing the sincere monk as one who ‘sees the danger in the smallest fault’. Here, at last, was someone who paid more than lip service to that ideal, who genuinely felt the closeness of death and who possessed such scrupulousness that it made him willing to risk climbing a treacherous mountain path in the middle of the night. It was a powerful and memorable lesson.

During this first retreat dedicated to meditation, Luang Por was still unsure of the path of practice most suited to him and experimented with a number of different meditation techniques. At one point, he decided to try using a rosary, and in an effort to make one for himself, he gathered up the requisite 108 seeds from the branch of a *tabaek* tree broken off by playful monkeys. Stymied by a lack of thread, however, he was forced to improvise and spent the next three days dropping the seeds one by one into a tin. Unsurprisingly, it was not a success, and he returned to mindfulness of breathing.

Luang Por still did not find meditation easy. But he persevered, constantly observing what worked and what did not. His biggest frustration was that he felt more at peace when he was not meditating than when he was. He reflected again and again on the fact that the more effort he put into meditation, the more his breathing became laboured and the less his mind would settle. It seemed that meditation made things worse rather than better. And then he made an important discovery:

My determination had turned into attachment. That’s why I got no results. Things got burdensome because of the craving that I carried with me into practice.

\**kamma*: Volitional action as expressed through body, speech, and mind.

## GHOSTS IN THE NIGHT

Luang Por's fear of ghosts had not been completely displaced by his growing courage and every now and again, it would flare up alarmingly. He usually kept it smothered, out of sight and mind, through a nightly recitation of protective spells and incantations before he slept. One night, however, after a long period of meditation high up on the ridge of Khao Wongkot, Luang Por felt such a surge of confidence in the power of his virtue that he omitted the recitations. Before long he would regret his decision.

The idea of virtue as protection is a hallowed one in the Buddhist world. It is a concept that became a cornerstone in Luang Por's teachings, especially to the laity, and helps to explain the great emphasis he was to place on keeping precepts. It was his firm belief that, in addition to its vital role in the development of peace and wisdom, virtuous conduct long-sustained has an enormous intrinsic power. Luang Por had experienced a growing sense of integrity and self-respect through his efforts to keep the vast number of monastic observances scrupulously. But, as yet, he had never quite dared to put his convictions in the protective power of his virtue to the test. He believed the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha to be supreme refuges but could not deny his barely suppressed fear of malevolent spirits. Yet on this cool and silent night he felt invincible, ready to take the risk.

The moment Luang Por lay down to sleep he became aware of a chilling and thickening of the air around his glottis. A malign presence began to bear down upon him. It was as if it had been lurking, waiting for the young monk to forget his chants; and through his hubris, he had made himself its prey. Suddenly, Luang Por was pinned down on his back, paralyzed. Whatever was crushing him seemed to exude a crude and elemental evil: he realized it was the kind of ghost called '*pee am*'. As the pressure intensified on his chest, he struggled desperately for breath. Somehow, he managed to maintain his presence of mind. He quelled the feelings of panic. Mentally he recited the word 'Buddho' over and over again with great determination. No other thoughts could enter his mind, and Luang Por found refuge in the recitation. The strength of the evil force was immense. Although checked, it put up a bitter struggle. Eventually,

the pressure weakened. Luang Por gradually began to recover movement in his body. It was over. After the shock wore off, there came a wave of exultation. He had survived an ordeal, as bad as his worst dreams, purely through the power of his virtue and meditation on the Buddha. He could ditch his spells.

This incident gave Luang Por's intellectual conviction in the power of virtue a strong emotional boost. Following it, he increased his care and attention to the precepts in the Monks' Discipline, restraining himself from even the most minor infringements. It was at this time that he finally plucked up the courage to dispose of his small emergency stash of money. In the Thai Sangha of the time, only the forest monks heeded the Buddha's prohibition against the receiving and use of money. Luang Por himself, so strict in other areas of the Discipline, had baulked at abandoning the safety net that money provided. But here in Wat Khao Wongkot, he determined that, from now on, there was to be no transgression of his precepts under any circumstances.

His problems with sexual desire were more intractable. Shortly before his father died, it had nearly led him out of the monkhood.

At one time I considered disrobing. I'd been a monk about five or six years at the time and I thought of the Buddha: six years and he was enlightened. But my mind was still concerned with the world, I wanted to return to it. 'Perhaps I should go out and make a contribution to the world for a short while and then I'll know what it's all about. Even the Buddha had a son. Maybe entering the monkhood without any worldly experience at all is too extreme.' I kept reflecting on it until some understanding arose. 'Yes, it's quite a good idea but the worrying thing is that this 'Buddha' is not the same as the last one.' Something in me resisted. 'I'm only afraid this 'Buddha' will sink down into the world and the mud.'

At Wat Khao Wongkot, Luang Por was searching for ways of overcoming lust. He believed that sense-restraint and non-indulgence in sexual thoughts would cause sexual desire to weaken.

I didn't look at a woman's face for the whole of the Rains Retreat. I allowed myself to speak to women but not to look at their faces. My eyes would strain upwards – they wanted to look so much I almost died! At the end of the retreat I went on alms-round in Lopburi town. Three months had passed since I last looked at a woman's face, and I wanted to know what it would be like. 'The defilements must be withering away by now', I thought. As soon as I'd made the decision, I looked at an approaching woman – Ohhh! Dressed in bright red. Just a single glance and my legs turned to jelly. I was totally discouraged. When was I ever going to be free from defilement?

Sense-restraint was certainly a key element of practice, but was not sufficient in itself. Instructing monks many years later, he said:

In the beginning, you have to keep your distance from women. But the true abandonment of lust comes only from developing the wisdom that sees things as they are.

#### LUANG PU MUN

It was during the Rains Retreat at Wat Khao Wongkot that Luang Por first heard the name of the monk who was to become a legendary figure in Thailand, the most revered monk of his generation. Today, on the shrines of houses, shops and offices throughout Isan, a photograph of Luang Pu Mun can commonly be seen in a place of honour just below that of the Buddha himself. The most common of these photographs reveals a slight figure dressed in the sombre robes of the forest monk, standing with an almost ghost-like stillness amongst unearthly trees, his hands clasped in front of him, radiating an austere composure. He seems to be looking right through the camera and straight into the viewer's heart. It is an inspiring but discomfiting picture. It challenges all that the viewer takes for granted.

The stories and anecdotes featuring Luang Pu Mun, related by his students and contemporaries, are startlingly reminiscent of the accounts of great monks found in the Buddhist scriptures. Although a certain amount of hyperbole may be expected from such sources, the comparisons are

not fanciful. Luang Pu Mun was an exemplary forest monk who was so devoted to the ascetic, peripatetic way of life that for a period of over fifty years he did not spend two consecutive Rains Retreats in the same monastery. It was only at the very end of his life, when he could no longer walk, that he gave up his daily alms-round. His psychic powers were, by all accounts, stupendous and the sharpness and penetration of his reflective powers, breathtaking. For many Thai Buddhists, Luang Pu Mun represents an utterly convincing proof that enlightenment exists and is attainable in this day and age.

Forest monks have never been absent from Thailand, but before Luang Pu Mun, they were usually scattered in small isolated communities that possessed little sense of being part of a wider tradition. These Sanghas tended to be centred around a charismatic teacher and rarely lasted long after his death. There are no records to tell us how many such groups have assembled and dispersed in the last seven hundred years. We will never know how many enlightened beings have come and gone. In the words of the Buddha himself, 'Like birds crossing the sky, they leave no tracks.'

Luang Pu Mun, however, lived at the beginning of a more informed and connected age. Accounts of his practice and teachings have been recorded in a large number of books. Many fine training monasteries, which attract visitors and pilgrims from all over the country, have been established by his disciples throughout Isan. He may be an unfathomable figure to many, but he is not obscure in the way that great monks of an earlier generation will always remain. The high standards maintained by the monks of his lineage and the integrity and prowess of his greatest disciples have ensured that today there is a respect for forest monks that has not existed in the country since the Sukhothai period. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Thai Forest Tradition, as we know it, was established almost single-handedly by Luang Pu Mun.

During most of his lifetime, however, Luang Pu Mun was relatively unknown. Throughout his monastic life, he shunned fame and status as a pestilent disease. In 1928, while staying at Wat Chedi Luang, one of the oldest and most prestigious monasteries in Chiang Mai, he received a letter from the powers-that-be in Bangkok, informing him of his appointment as the monastery's new abbot. Before long, he had gathered his possessions

and disappeared into the mountains. It was another eleven years before he was seen in the city again.

Luang Pu Mun could be a fierce and exacting teacher (one of his famous scoldings would, in a senior disciple's memorable phrase, 'shrive your liver'), but he inspired a quiet and intense devotion from those around him. One layman, whose life had been transformed by his contact with Luang Pu Mun, was then living at Khao Wongkot and it was he who first spoke of the great master to Luang Por. Apparently, Luang Pu Mun had finally returned to Isan after so many years of solitary wandering in the north of the country and a large group of monks had gathered around him in the Phu Phan Mountains of northern Isan. Monks of the Mahānikāya lineage were also receiving teachings. Luang Por's plans for the cold season began to take shape.

At the end of the retreat, Luang Por, together with three other monks, a novice and two laymen, set off on the long walk back to Isan. They broke the journey at Bahn Kor, and after a few days rest, began the 240 kilometre hike northwards. By the tenth day, they had reached the elegant white stupa of That Phanom, a revered pilgrimage spot on the banks of the Mekong, and they paid homage to the Buddha's relics enshrined within it. They continued their walk in stages, regularly finding forest monasteries along the way in which to spend the night. Even so, it was an arduous trek and the novice and one of the laymen asked to turn back. The group consisted of just three monks and a layman when they finally arrived at Wat Pah Nong Peu, the home of Luang Pu Mun.

As they walked into the monastery, Luang Por was immediately struck by its tranquil and secluded atmosphere. The central area, in which stood a small raised wooden Dhamma Hall, was immaculately swept, and the few monks they caught sight of were attending to their daily chores silently, with a measured and composed gracefulness. There was something about the monastery that was like no other that he had been in before – the silence was strangely charged and vibrant. Luang Por and his companions were received politely and, after being advised where to put up their glots, took a welcome opportunity to bathe away the grime of the road.

Luang Por was never to speak in any great detail about this first meeting which was to have such a monumental effect on his life. But for monks who have lived in the forest monasteries of Isan, it is a scene easy to imagine. The three young monks may be pictured with their double-layered outer robes folded neatly over their left shoulders, minds fluctuating between keen anticipation and cold fear, making their way through the gathering dusk to the wooden Dhamma Hall to pay respects to Luang Pu Mun. As he approaches the congregation of resident monks, Luang Por starts to crawl on his knees towards the great master. He approaches a slight and aged figure with an indomitable diamond-like presence. Luang Pu Mun's deeply penetrating gaze bears into Luang Por as he bows three times and sits down at an appropriate distance.

Most of the resident monks are sitting with eyes closed in meditation, one slightly behind the teacher slowly fanning away the evening's mosquitoes. As Luang Por glances up, he notices how prominently Luang Pu Mun's collarbone juts through the pale skin above his robe and how his thin mouth, stained red from chewing betel nut, forms such an arresting contrast to the strange luminosity of his presence. As is the time-honoured custom amongst Buddhist monks, Luang Pu Mun first asks the visitors how long they have been in the robes, the monasteries they have practised in and the details of their journey. Did they have any doubts about the practice? Luang Por replies that he does.

It is at this point that he was later to take up the story himself. He said he had been studying the Vinaya texts with great enthusiasm but had become discouraged. The Discipline seemed too detailed to be practical; it didn't seem possible to keep every single rule. What should one's standard be? Luang Pu Mun listened in silence. Then he gave simple but practical advice. He advised Luang Por to take the 'two guardians of the world' – wise shame (*hiri*) and wise fear of consequences (*ottappa*) – as his basic principles. In the presence of those two virtues, he said, everything else would follow.

He then began to discourse on the threefold training of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*, the four roads to success and the five spiritual powers.\* Eyes

\* See Glossary, pages 823, 808, 808, respectively.

half closed, his voice became progressively stronger and faster as he proceeded, as if he was moving into a higher and higher gear. With an absolute authority, he described the ‘way things truly are’ and the path to liberation. Luang Por and his companions sat completely enrapt. Luang Por said that, although he had spent an exhausting day on the road, listening to Luang Pu Mun’s Dhamma talk made all of his weariness disappear. His mind became lucidly calm\* and clear, and he felt as if he was floating in the air above his seat. It was late at night before Luang Pu Mun called the meeting to an end, and Luang Por returned to his grot, aglow.

On the second night, Luang Pu Mun gave more teachings, and Luang Por felt that he had come to the end of his doubts about the practice that lay ahead. He felt a joy and rapture in the Dhamma that he had never known before. Now what remained was for him to put his knowledge into practice. Indeed, one of the teachings that had inspired him the most on those two evenings was this injunction to make himself ‘a witness to the truth’. But the most clarifying explanation, one that gave him the necessary context or basis for practice that he had hitherto been lacking, was of a distinction between the mind itself and transient states of mind which arose and passed away within it.

Luang Pu Mun said they’re merely states. Through not understanding that point, we take them to be real, to be the mind itself. In fact, they’re all just transient states. As soon as he said that, things suddenly became clear. Suppose there’s happiness present in the mind: it’s a different kind of thing, it’s on a different level, to the mind itself. If you see that, then you can stop, you can put things down. When conventional realities are seen for what they are, then it’s ultimate truth. Most people lump everything together as the mind itself, but actually there are states of mind together with the knowing of them. If you understand that point, then there’s not a lot to do.

\*The usual translation of the Thai word ‘*sangop*’ is ‘peace’, and this is correct in most contexts. But when dealing with the practice of meditation, Luang Por uses the word ‘*sangop*’ in ways that can sometimes make this translation problematic. For this reason, in a meditation context, it has sometimes been rendered as the unorthodox translation, ‘lucid calm’.

On the third day, Luang Por paid his respects to Luang Pu Mun and led his small group off into the lonely forests of Phu Phan once more. He left Nong Peu never to return again, but with his heart full of an inspiration that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

#### ORDERS OF THE DAY – A SHORT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Fragmentation of the Sangha into a number of different orders has been a notable feature of Sri Lankan and Burmese Buddhism. In Thailand, however, the creation of new orders has been extremely rare. This anomaly is explained to a large extent by the fact that it is only in Thailand that the Sangha has enjoyed strong and uninterrupted royal support throughout its existence and has been spared the stresses of living under an unsympathetic colonial administration. The Thai abhorrence of conflict and lack of enthusiasm for doctrinal niceties have also played their part.

For the last 160 years, there have been two orders in Thailand: the *Mahānikāya* and *Dhammayut nikāya*. The word ‘*nikāya*’ is most commonly rendered as ‘sect’ but that term tends to suggest – misleadingly – doctrinal dispute. Nikāyas do not, in fact, differ in matters of belief or interpretation of the teachings, but rather to the practical application of the Vinaya. In other words, it is on questions of orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy that they define themselves. The Dhammayut ('bound with Dhamma' or 'Righteous') nikāya is the more recent. It was established by King Mongkut in the 1830s during the period he spent in the monkhood prior to ascending the throne. His intention was that it should provide an elite group of monks that would act as a regenerative force within the Mahā ('great' or 'greater') nikāya.

The monastic order of the time was certainly in a parlous state. The destruction of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya in 1767 and the period of anarchy that followed it had dealt a crushing blow to the organization of an already corrupt system. Despite the repeated efforts at reform from the beginning of the Bangkok Era in the late eighteenth century, standards of Discipline were still very lax, and educational standards at a nadir. King Mongkut had become a monk during the final illness of his father, King Buddha Loetla Nabhalai. When, despite his own superior claim to

the throne, he was overlooked by the Privy Council in favour of his half-brother, he decided to pursue a monastic career until the day, if ever, when he might be called to secular power.

He soon became deeply disillusioned by what he found around him in the monasteries of Bangkok and, with a few like-minded followers, determined to re-establish what he saw as ancient standards that had been abandoned. His aim was a familiarly protestant one: to bring contemporary practices back in line with the teachings in the Buddhist scriptures. He supported a more rational, ‘scientific’ approach to the Dhamma with an eradication of superstitions, an increased study of the Pali texts, a new more ‘correct’ way of chanting, changes in ritual and in the wearing of the robe; and most importantly, a new strictness in adherence to the Vinaya.

Although the number of Dhammayut monks was relatively small (it has never exceeded a tenth of the Sangha as a whole), the lineage’s close links to the royal family ensured that within a short time it possessed formidable prestige, influence and resources. King Chulalongkorn, King Mongkut’s son and successor, appointed Dhammayut monks to the top administrative positions in the monkhood throughout the country, using them both as agents of reform in the Sangha nation-wide and also politically, as an important tool in what has been referred to as Bangkok’s ‘colonization’ of the provinces. Unsurprisingly, since this new order was established as a specific response to the alleged corruption of the old, thus usurping much of its prestige, it provoked widespread resentment.

Although overt conflict between the two orders was rare, room for serious discord was not hard to find. The reformers’ view of the existing Sangha was a demeaning one. They held that a significant number of monks had, over the years, committed unconfessed expulsion offences. Consequently, as every Ordination ceremony in which those illegitimate monks had participated as members of the quorum were automatically rendered null and void, the existing lineage was irredeemably corrupt. Serious doubts had to be entertained as to whether any of the members of the Mahānikāya were, technically speaking, monks at all. The Dhammayut movement began with King Mongkut requesting Ordination afresh – on this second occasion, from a quorum of Mon monks whom he believed to be ‘pure’ in Vinaya. This action set an important precedent. The new

order was to define and legitimize itself by the asserted ritual correctness of its members' formal entrance into the monkhood.

Critics might argue that there could be as little proof that the Mon lineage was historically pure, as there was that the Mahānikāya lineage was not. They might assert that reform from within would be more in line with the Vinaya, and less threatening to the long-term harmony of the Sangha than the creation of a new order. But such voices were few, and the Dhammayut Order went from strength to strength.

Ubon was chosen by King Mongkut as the centre for the propagation of the new order in Isan, and he sponsored the construction of Wat Supatanaram on the banks of the Moon River close to the city, to act as its main base. During the second half of the nineteenth century, as Ubon became renowned for scholastic excellence, many other Dhammayut monasteries were built in and around the city, and monks trained in Ubon spread the reforms into other areas of Isan. In 1892, when Mun Gaengaew, a native of Khongjiam District, decided to become a monk, he chose to request Ordination at one of Ubon's Dhammayut monasteries, Wat Si Tong (now Wat Si Ubon). Shortly afterwards, he moved to Wat Liap, on the outskirts of the town to study under the well-known meditation teacher Luang Pu Sao. It would turn out to be a momentous step as the Luang Pu Mun lineage that eventually developed would be primarily a Dhammayut lineage.

If for no reason other than deference to the Dhammayut authorities, Luang Pu Mun had no choice but to take the question of lineage seriously. Over the years, almost all of his disciples – most of whom had originally entered the monkhood in one of the far more numerous Mahānikāya wats – abandoned their old affiliation in order to be formally admitted into the Dhammayut Order. The monks valued the opportunity to put behind them a way of living the monks' life they now rejected and to formally express their commitment to their teacher.

By the early 1920s, the group of Luang Pu Mun's disciples was growing rapidly and having a galvanizing effect on Isan. Although primarily committed to living in lonely places in accordance with the traditional norms of the forest monk, they were not indifferent to the society they

had renounced and which now supported them. In groups of two or three, they would go on long treks through the countryside combining periods devoted to their own meditation practice with preaching to the laity. Their stress on the abandonment of the superstitious animist beliefs (that had in many places smothered a supposedly dominant Buddhism) and taking refuge in the Triple Gem, sometimes took on the nature of a crusade. Luang Por Lee, one of the most energetic and articulate of Luang Pu Mun's great disciples, related one such effort in his own village in northern Ubon:

“Once a year, when the season came around, each household would have to sacrifice a chicken, a duck or a pig. Altogether this meant that in one year hundreds of living creatures had to die for the sake of spirits, because there would also be times when people would make sacrifices to cure an illness in the family. All of this struck me as a senseless waste. If the spirits really did exist, that's not the type of food they would eat. It would be far better to make merit and dedicate it to the spirits. If they didn't accept that, then drive them away with the authority of the Dhamma. So I ordered the people to burn all the village shrines. When some of the villagers began to lose nerve, for fear that there would be nothing to protect them in the future, I wrote down the chant for spreading goodwill and gave a copy to everyone in village, guaranteeing that nothing would happen. I've since learned that all the area around the ancestral shrines is now planted with crops, and that the spot where the spirits were said to be fierce is now a new village.”

Although Luang Pu Mun and many of his closest disciples were natives of Ubon (at that time, by far the largest of the Isan provinces), his lineage was to flourish further north. The reasons for this were largely a function of Sangha politics. The Dhammayut Order had begun its life as an essentially urban scholastic movement. From its inception, its upper echelons had tended to distrust forest monks as contributing to the perpetuation of the irrational, unorthodox currents in the Sangha that they were trying to eradicate. To them, forest monks were ignorant of the Pali texts, did not keep the Vinaya strictly, and were mavericks outside of the control of the larger Sangha. This may have been true of the forest monks in central Thailand in the mid-nineteenth century, but it failed to recognize the

unique features of the Luang Pu Mun group – in particular, their devotion to Vinaya training, which in many ways exceeded that of the monks who criticized them.

Phra Bodhivamsajahn\*, the head of the Sangha in Isan, was based in Ubon. He was a steadfast opponent of the Luang Pu Mun group. He saw them as poorly educated fanatics who stirred up trouble with the local village monks wherever they went. He made life as difficult for them as he could whenever they came to Ubon. On one notorious occasion, he requested the local authorities in Hua Tapan District to drive them out of the province. Consequently, the Luang Pu Mun monks spent most of their time in the more remote parts of northern Isan. The situation changed somewhat in the late 1920s due to the influence in Bangkok of Chao Khun Upālī, the famous administrator and scholar. As a childhood friend of Luang Pu Mun, and as friend and colleague to Phra Bodhivamsajahn, he was able to mediate between them. Phra Bodhivamsajahn overcame his prejudice and later went on to become a devoted supporter of Luang Pu Mun and his disciples. But by that time, the die was set. Luang Pu Mun was on his sojourn in Chiang Mai, and his disciples were forging ties to lonely areas of Isan, hundreds of kilometres away from Ubon.

Luang Por Chah's visit to Luang Pu Mun was then not simply that of a young tudong monk to the father of the Thai Forest Tradition, but also that of a Mahānikāya monk to a Dhammayut monastery. During his brief visit, some of the younger resident monks urged Luang Por to switch to the Dhammayut Order as they had done, but he remained unmoved. Most probably, he considered a change of affiliation to be ungrateful or disloyal. Luang Por himself never revealed his thoughts on the matter. What is known is that one of the questions that he asked Luang Pu Mun during his visit was this central one of re-ordination. Was it necessary for one intent on realization of the Dhamma? Luang Pu Mun put his mind at rest: no, it was not.

\*One of the leading figures in twentieth-century Thai Buddhism. His given name was Uan, his monk's name Tisso and his final title, Somdet Mahavirawong. He became the first Sanghanāyaka or head of the Thai Sangha after government-initiated reforms in the 1930s.

It has been recorded that, prior to Luang Por's visit, one of Luang Pu Mun's senior disciples had a meditative vision in which he saw Ubon split off from the rest of Isan. Luang Pu Mun apparently considered this a sign that Ubon would not be a stronghold for the Dhammayut forest monks in the future. It is said that he recognized in Luang Por Chah the one who would introduce the Forest Tradition into the Mahānikāya Order and establish monasteries in Ubon.

After only three days, Luang Por left Nong Peu and, as far as is known, did not return.\* Despite such a short time in his presence, Luang Por Chah has long been numbered amongst the great disciples of Luang Pu Mun. There is some room for doubt on this point: can two nights of instruction, without any formal declaration of a teacher-student relationship, really count as basis for discipleship? When asked why he stayed with Luang Pu Mun for such a short time, Luang Por replied that a person with his eyes closed could spend years close to a fire and still not see it, whereas someone with good eyes would take little time at all. If that statement reflects how Luang Por felt at the time, it indicates an unusual self-confidence for one so relatively inexperienced in practice. He appears to be implying that he received from Luang Pu Mun something which, in other Buddhist traditions, might be described as a transmission. Whereas it is true that transmission is not an idea widely found in Theravada Buddhism, it certainly seems that following this meeting, Luang Por felt his path had been illuminated.

It is as if, to use another analogy, Luang Por felt that he had been given a clear outline of the work to be done and the tools to do it and all that remained was for him to apply himself to the task. Although he did not feel it necessary to maintain a close proximity to the teacher, he expressed the conviction throughout his life that whatever success he achieved in his practice was the outcome of the short visit to Nong Peu. He considered Luang Pu Mun his teacher, and he was always true to the instructions that he received directly from him.

In later years, the physical distance between Wat Pah Pong and the Dhammayut forest monasteries in northern Isan, compounded by the

\*Luang Pu Mun passed away in 1949.

difference in nikāya, meant that Luang Por had infrequent contact with other disciples of Luang Pu Mun. One advantage of the separation was the freedom it gave him to establish his own style of teaching, without having to worry that any deviation from Luang Pu Mun's way of doing things would be taken as disrespect to the teacher. As will be seen, the way of practice at Wat Pah Pong gave a unique importance to group rather than individual practice. It may be considered one of Luang Por's distinctive contributions to the tradition.

Luang Por led his companions along the quiet paths that threaded through the Phu Phan Mountains with a new-found confidence. The immediate result of his meeting with Luang Pu Mun manifested as an unshakeable determination to realize directly in his heart the truths that had been so lucidly expounded by the great master. Years later, as the leader of a community of monks, he would often stress that the monk intent on truth must, without melodrama or posturing of any kind, be ready to put his life on the line. This was the frame of mind that accompanied him as he walked out of Wat Pah Nong Peu into the forests and mountains of northern Isan.

#### KINDNESS OF THE TEACHER

The Buddha taught monks to constantly recollect the fragility of life and the ever-present threat of death, to spend every moment well, and take nothing for granted. At night, monks are encouraged to reflect on all the various ways they might die before the following dawn: snake bites, scorpion bites, an awkward fall, appendicitis ... the list is soberingly long. Dwelling in tropical forests, where their insecurity is palpable and virtually impossible to forget, is particularly conducive to this kind of contemplation.

One night in a thick forest in Nakhon Phanom, a roving pack of wild dogs caught the scent of Luang Por as he sat meditating in his glot. The motionless form of a cross-legged monk must have been a strange and unsettling sight to them. Within a few moments, Luang Por was jerked from mindfulness of his breath to the awareness of a snarling mass of angry creatures, with a mosquito net his only protection. Fear coursed

through his body and with a supreme effort, Luang Por steadied his mind. Following the ancient tradition, he made a solemn resolution:

I did not come here to hurt anyone or anything. I have come to practice Dhamma, in order to realize liberation from suffering. If I have ever oppressed you in a past life, then kill me so that I may pay off my debt. But if there is no bad blood between us, then please leave me in peace.

Luang Por closed his eyes. The wild dogs circled his glot, howling fiercely and racing in to lunge at him from all sides, only to be confused by the thin cotton net that enclosed him. As soon as one of them dared to bite through it and expose the net's flimsiness, Luang Por knew it would be the end, and he became afraid once more. Then suddenly, out of the thick blackness of the night, Luang Pu Mun appeared, holding aloft a blazing torch and walking straight towards the wild dogs. Halting at the side of Luang Por's glot, he scolded them sharply, 'Go! Leave him alone!' He lifted a length of wood as if to strike them, and the wild dogs, stunned and thrown into disarray, ran off. Luang Por relieved and grateful to Luang Pu Mun for saving him, opened his eyes to a scene of complete darkness and silence.

The next morning, Luang Por set off down the trail with a heightened sense of the connection he felt to Luang Pu Mun. Together with the Postulant Gaew, his only remaining companion, he was soon to need every ounce of mental strength he possessed to face his most testing examination so far.

#### IN THE CREMATION FOREST

For thousands of years, the Thais have perceived themselves living in a universe inhabited by unseen forces, malevolent and benign. It is unusual to discover a blind belief in the non-existence of ghosts, even amongst the most materialist of modern urban dwellers. Fascination with ghost stories is almost universal. Although secular values have spread relentlessly throughout Thai society, there is no sign of them displacing the deep belief in spirits.

Many different kinds of ghost are spoken of in Thailand. The three kinds that can possess people are particularly feared: *pee tai hong* (victims of a violent death), *pee tai tong klom* (women who died during childbirth) and *peepob* who, greedy for raw meat and offal, enter people's bodies and chew away voraciously at their intestines. *Pee pret* (Pali: *peta*), meanwhile, are the hungry ghosts met with in Buddhist texts. They are horrifyingly ugly: gaunt and emaciated, with dishevelled hair, long necks, sunken cheeks, deep-set eyes. They feed on pus and blood and have huge bellies as well as tiny mouths no bigger than the eye of a needle: their appetite is never satisfied. They dwell in cremation forests and desolate areas and emit long, shrill and plaintive cries as they approach human beings. In the time and place in which Luang Por grew up – Isan of the 1920s and 1930s – fear of ghosts was normal and rational: they were all around.

While the modern Western mind is not so terrified of ghosts, it has its own profound fears. In George Orwell's novel *1984*, prisoners under interrogation are confronted with the deepest and most visceral of these in the dreaded Room 101. The following passage might be best appreciated if it is considered that the cremation forest was Luang Por's Room 101 and that he entered it of his own accord.

It was late afternoon, and I was really afraid; I didn't want to go. I was paralyzed. I told myself to go, but I couldn't. I invited Postulant Gaew to accompany me. 'Go and die there,' I told myself. 'If it's time to die, go and get it over and done with. If it's all such a burden, if you're so stupid, just die!' That's the kind of thing I was saying to myself, even though, at the same time, I still really didn't want to go. But I forced myself, 'If you're going to wait until you're completely ready, you'll never go', I reasoned, 'and you won't ever tame your mind.' In the end, I had to drag myself there.

As I got to the edge of the forest, I faltered. I had never stayed in a cremation forest before in my life. Postulant Gaew was going to stick close, but I wouldn't have it. I sent him off a good distance away. Actually, I wanted him to stay really close, but I was worried that I'd become dependent on him. I thought if I had a friend close by, then I wouldn't be afraid, and so I resisted the

temptation and sent him away. ‘If I’m so frightened, then tonight let me die. Let’s see what happens.’ I was afraid; but I did it. It’s not that I wasn’t afraid – but I dared. ‘At the worst’, I told myself, ‘all that can happen is that you’ll die.’

Well, as the dusk started to thicken a little – just my luck! – they carried a corpse, swaying from side to side, into the cremation forest. Why should this happen on this very day? As I practised walking meditation, pacing backwards and forwards, I could hardly feel my feet touch the ground. ‘Get out of here!’ my mind screamed. The villagers invited me to go and chant the funeral verses. I wouldn’t have anything to do with it. ‘Get out of here!’ I was still thinking. But after I’d gone a short distance I returned. They came and buried\* the corpse right by my glot and then made a sitting platform for me from the bamboo they’d used to carry the body.

What should I do now? The village was two or three kilometres away. ‘This is it for sure. What shall I do? ... Just get ready to die.’ Postulant Gaew moved closer. I sent him away, and told myself: ‘Just go ahead and die! Why are you so terrified? Now we’re going to have some fun with this. If you don’t dare do it, you won’t know what it’s like.’ Oh! It was such an intense feeling. It hardly seemed as if my feet were touching the ground. And it was getting darker and darker. ‘Where are you going to go now? Go right into the middle of the cremation forest. Die! You’re born and then you die, isn’t that the way it goes?’ I battled with myself like that.

After the sun had gone down, I felt I should get into my glot. My legs were refusing to move. My feelings urged me into the glot. I’d been practising walking meditation in front of it, opposite the grave. As I walked towards the glot it wasn’t so bad, but as soon as I turned towards the grave – I don’t know what it was – it was as if there was something pulling at my back. Cold shivers went down my spine.

\*When somebody dies from unnatural causes such as murder or suicide, the body is buried rather than cremated.

That's what the training is all about. You feel so frightened your legs refuse to walk, and so you stop; then, when the fear has gone, you start again.

So, as it got dark, I entered my glot and a wave of relief swept over me. I felt as happy and secure as if the mosquito net was a seven-tiered wall. My alms-bowl seemed like an old friend. That's what can happen when you're on your own: you can even see a bowl as your friend! I had no one to rely on, and so I felt happy and took comfort in its presence. It's on occasions like this that you really see your mind.

I sat in my glot and watched for malevolent spirits right throughout the night. I never slept a wink. I was afraid – afraid but daring to train myself, daring to do it. I sat staring into the darkness the whole night. I wasn't sleepy once; drowsiness was afraid to show its face as well. I just sat there like that the whole night ... In practice, if you're that scared and you just follow your mind, you'd never do it. It's the same with everything: if you don't do it, if you don't practise, you don't get any benefit. I practised.

As the dawn broke, I was overjoyed: I was still alive. I felt so happy. From now on, I just wanted there to be only the day. In my heart, I wanted to kill the night forever. I felt good; I hadn't died after all.

Even the dogs were out to test me. I went on alms-round alone and some dogs chased along behind me and tried to bite my legs. I didn't chase them away. Let them bite! It seemed that something was out to get me. They kept snapping away at my ankles. Some bites got home, some didn't. I felt shooting pains and every now and again it seemed as if a wound had been opened up. The village women didn't try to get hold of their dogs. They thought spirits had followed me into the village and that's why the dogs were barking. They were chasing after spirits and biting them, not me – so they just left them to it. I didn't drive the dogs off, just let them bite me. 'Last night I was almost frightened to death, and now I'm being attacked by dogs. Let them bite me if I've ever

hurt them in past lives.' But they just snapped away ineffectually. This is what's called training yourself.

After alms-round, I ate my meal and started to feel better. The sun came out and I felt warm and at ease. During the day, I had a rest and by then my mind was getting back to normal. I thought everything was alright; it was only fear. 'Tonight, I should be able to get down to some meditation practice. I've been through the fear. Tonight, it should be fine.'

Late afternoon and here we go again. They carried in another corpse, an adult. It was even worse than the previous night. They were going to cremate it right in front of my glot. This was much worse. At least the villagers burned the body, but when they invited me to go and contemplate the corpse I stayed where I was. Only when all the villagers had left did I go. 'They've all gone home and left me alone with the corpse. What shall I do?' I don't know what similes I could use to describe to you this fear - and in the night-time too.

The fire had burned right down. The embers were red, green, blue. They spluttered and every now and again broke into flame. I couldn't bring myself to practise walking meditation in front of the fire. As soon as it was completely dark I got into my glot as I'd done the night before. I sat in that thick forest with the smell of the corpse-burning smoke in my nostrils the whole night. It was worse than the night before. I sat with my back to the fire with no idea of sleeping. How could I sleep? I didn't have the slightest desire to; I was nervous and wide awake the entire night. I was afraid, and I didn't know who I could depend on. 'You're here by yourself and you'll have to rely on yourself. There's nowhere to go; its pitch black out there. Just sit down and die! Where do you want to go anyway?'

If you were just to follow what your mind told you, you'd never go to a place like that. Who would willingly put themselves through such torment? Only someone with a firm conviction in the Buddha's teachings of the fruits of practice.

It was about ten o'clock, and I was sitting with my back to the fire. Suddenly I heard a sound from behind me, '*toeng-tang! toeng-tang!*' I thought that maybe the corpse had rolled off the fire and perhaps some jackals had come to fight over it. Or something. But no, it wasn't that. I sat listening. Then came the sound, '*khreut-khrat! khreut-khrat!*', like someone moving ponderously through the forest. I tried to dismiss it from my mind. Shortly afterwards, it began to walk towards me. I could hear the sound of somebody approaching me from behind. The footfalls were heavy, almost like a water buffalo's. But it wasn't a water buffalo. Fallen leaves thickly covered the forest floor – it was February – and I heard the sound of someone treading on the big brittle leaves, '*khop! khop!*'

There was a termite mound at the side of my glot. I heard the steps skirting it as they approached. I thought, 'Whatever it's going to do, let it, because you're ready to die. Where do you think you'd run to anyway?' But in the end, it didn't come towards me. The sounds thudded off ahead in the direction of the postulant. After it moved away there was silence. I don't know what it was, all I was aware of was the fear and that made me imagine all kinds of things.

It must have been about half an hour later that I heard the sound of someone walking back from the direction of Postulant Gaew. It was exactly like the sound of a human being! It came straight towards the glot as if it was determined to trample whoever was inside. I just sat there with my eyes closed. I wasn't going to open them for anything. If I was going to die, then let me die right there. When it reached me, it stopped and stood silent and motionless in front of the glot. I felt as if burnt hands were clutching at the air in front of me. I was sure the end had come. My whole body was petrified with terror. I forgot 'Buddho', 'Dhammo', 'Sangho' – everything. All that existed was the fear; I was as stretched and tight as a monastery drum. 'Alright. You're there – but I'm staying here.' My mind was numb. I didn't know if I was sitting on a seat or floating in the air. I tried to concentrate on the sense of knowing.

It's probably like tipping water into a jar. If you just keep adding more and more, then eventually it overflows. I was so frightened, and the fear kept increasing until finally it overflowed. There was a release. I asked myself, 'What are you afraid of? Why are you so terrified?' I didn't actually say that, the question arose spontaneously in my mind, and the answer arose in response, 'I'm afraid of death.' That's what it said. So I asked further, 'Where is death? Why are you so much more afraid than an ordinary householder?' I kept asking where death was until finally I got the answer: 'death lies within us.' 'If that's the case, then where can you run to escape from it? If you run away, it will run with you. If you sit down, it will sit with you. If you get up and walk off, it will walk with you because death lies within us. There's nowhere to go. Whether you're afraid or not makes no difference, you still have to die. There's no escape.' These reflections cut off my thoughts.

When this dialogue had come to an end, familiar perceptions returned to the surface of my mind and the fear subsided. The change was as simple and total as when you flip your hand over from its back to the palm. I felt a great amazement that such fearlessness could arise right in the very same place that there had been such a strong fear just a few moments before. My heart soared to the heavens.

With the overcoming of my fear, it started to pour with rain – maybe it was the rain that falls on lotus leaves in the legend, the one that only makes you wet if you let it – I don't know. There was the sound of thunder, of wind and of rain, deafeningly loud. It rained so heavily all my fears of death were forgotten. Trees crashed down and I was impervious. My robes, every piece of cloth I had was soaked. I just sat there, quite still.

Then, after a while, I started to weep. It just happened by itself. Tears started to roll down my face. Before that I'd been thinking how like an orphan I was, sitting there shivering in the middle of the pouring rain. I thought that probably none of the people happily asleep in their houses would imagine that there was a

monk sitting out here in the rain all night; they were probably snuggling up in their warm blankets. ‘And here I am, sitting here, soaked to the skin – what’s it all about?’ As I started dwelling on those thoughts a sense of the sorrowfulness of my life arose, and I began to cry. The tears were streaming down: ‘That’s alright, it’s bad stuff. Let it all run out until there’s none left.’ That’s what practice is.

I don’t know how to explain what happened after that. Following my victory, I just sat there and all these things took place in my mind. It would be impossible to describe them all; I came to know and see so many things – too many to relate. It reminded me of the Buddha’s words: ‘*Paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*’ – ‘to be seen by each wise person by themselves’. That was really true. I was suffering out in the middle of the rain and who could know how I felt? Nobody – only me. I was so deeply afraid, and then the fear disappeared. The people in their warm, dry houses couldn’t know what that was like. Only I could know that because it’s paccattam. Who could I tell? Who could I relate it to? The more I reflected on it, the more certain I became and the more my heart was filled with energy and faith in the teachings. I contemplated the Dhamma until dawn.

As it became light I opened my eyes, and whichever way I looked the whole world was yellow. The danger had gone. During the night, I’d felt the need to urinate, but I’d been too afraid to get up. I’d held it back, and after some time the urge passed. In the morning when I got up, the whole world looked as yellow as the early morning sunlight. I went to urinate, and all that came out was blood. I wondered whether something inside me had torn or broken. I became afraid that something must have ruptured, and then I was confronted by an immediate retort, ‘If it’s ruptured, then it’s nobody’s fault; it’s just the way things are.’ It was an immediate and spontaneous answer to the worry, ‘If it’s ruptured, it’s ruptured. If you’re going to die, you’re going to die. You’ve just been sitting there minding your own business; if it wants to rupture, let it.’ The mind carried on this dialogue. It was like two

people struggling for possession of something, one pulling it one way and the other pulling it back again.

One part of my mind elbowed its way in saying there was a serious problem. Another part fought with it immediately. As I urinated, the blood came out in gobs. I started to wonder where I could find some medicine. ‘Don’t bother. Where would you go anyway? You’re a monk, you can’t dig up medicinal roots. If it’s time to die, then just die! What can you do about it? Dying while practising the teachings is noble. You should be satisfied to die. If you were going to die for the sake of something evil, that wouldn’t be worth it; but if you die like this, it’s fitting.’ Alright, I said to myself, so be it.

That morning, Luang Por went on alms-round shaking with a fever that he bore patiently for a week before deciding to ask permission to convalesce at a nearby monastery. Ten days later, he had recovered sufficiently to continue his wandering.

By this time of the year, the nights would not have been so cold and the day’s heat stronger. Soon the hot season would glue the world together into a dense, smothering blanket, penetrated only by an occasional sweet and cooling breeze. As he made his way eastwards, the streams in which Luang Por bathed and from which he took his drinking water would have been diminishing rapidly, the paddy fields surrounding the occasional hamlets would be becoming hard as rock, cracking beneath a heat haze, while water buffaloes soaking in muddy pools of water would be making the most of them before they disappeared. At the edges of hamlets, he would have seen women searching in the woods for edible roots and leaves to supplement their meagre hot season diet.

In the thickly forested valleys of Nakhon Phanom, the huge hardwood trees – *yang*, *pradu* and *daeng* – stood like grave but kindly sentinels on the path. As he walked, he would have heard the sound of hornbills swooping above his head, or perhaps seen flocks of bright green parrots sweeping and weaving through the forest in perfect formation. Eventually, he arrived at his goal: Wat Pah Bahn Nong Hee<sup>\*</sup> the monastery of Luang Pu

\*Also known as Wat Pah Mettāviveka.

Kinaree, one of the few tudong monks in the Mahānikāya Order. It was to be the beginning of a long and fruitful association.

## EXEMPLARS

Luang Por was always a very self-reliant monk. He rarely sought teachings from other monks, and when he did so, seldom asked questions, preferring to listen and observe. Luang Pu Kinaree was probably the closest that anybody came to being a mentor to Luang Por in the conventional sense of that term. He was not a monk with an immediate charisma and his reclusiveness meant that he was little known in the tudong fraternity. But Luang Por said that the longer he lived with Luang Pu Kinaree, the more his respect for him grew. He spoke admiringly of Luang Pu Kinaree's devotion to the Vinaya, his simplicity, his ability to maintain mindfulness in all postures, and his patient attention to detail. Although he usually seemed very low-key and relaxed about his practice, there were also periods when Luang Pu Kinaree would practice walking meditation for many hours at a stretch and live on well water for days on end.

Luang Pu Kinaree had led an eventful monastic life. After receiving teachings from Luang Pu Mun and Luang Pu Sao, he had spent many years wandering on tudong, including over ten years in Burma. He had endured many hardships on the way, and, more than once, had come close to death. He was one of only a handful of Thai monks of his generation to have visited the Buddhist Holy Sites in northeast India. And yet, even at the time Luang Por came to know him, Luang Pu Kinaree did not give the impression of being a hard and seasoned traveller. Rather, he wore about him, like an old well-used robe, a modest self-sufficiency and ease that spoke of someone who felt he had nothing more to prove.

He was a sweet, gentle man who seemed content with whatever each moment might bring him. He rarely spoke. It seemed he found few things so worth saying as to merit disturbing the silence. He was an industrious man who would spend his days tinkering, pottering, sewing, cleaning. All of his requisites he made himself, and he used them until they fell apart. As he got older, his appearance was ever more shabby and decrepit. But, as Luang Por discovered, looks were deceptive: Luang Pu Kinaree's mind was bright and clear.

After a short initial visit, Luang Por continued his wandering and then came back to Nong Hee to spend the Rains Retreat. He relates the kind of teaching that inspired him to return.

At that time, I'd hear teachers giving Dhamma talks about letting go, letting go, and I still couldn't make much of it. Luang Pu Kinaree asked me to sew a set of robes. I went at it flat out. I wanted to get it over and done with quickly. I thought once the task was done I'd be free of business and be able to get down to some meditation. One day, Luang Pu walked over. I was sewing out in the sun, totally unaware of the heat. I just wanted to get finished so that I could devote myself to meditation. He asked me what the hurry was. I told him that I wanted to get finished. When he asked me why, I told him that I wanted to practice meditation. Then he asked me what I would do after I'd finished meditating. When I told him, he asked me what I would do after that. I realized that there would be no end to this line of questioning. Then he said, 'Don't you realize that it's just this sewing that is your meditation. Where are you rushing off to? You've already gone wrong. Craving is flooding your head and you've no idea that it's happening.'

Another shaft of light. I'd been sure I was making merit. I'd thought merely doing the job was good enough. I'd get it done quickly and go on to something else. But Luang Pu pointed out my mistake: What was the hurry?

It was probably at this time that Luang Por would have first heard stories of Luang Pu Kinaree's mentor, Luang Pu Tongrat, a monk whose colourful personality could not have been more different from Luang Pu Kinaree's, but who shared many of his most inspiring traits. Apart from Luang Pu Mun himself and Luang Pu Kinaree, Luang Pu Tongrat was the monk Luang Por would most often praise to his disciples in later years. His dedication to the Vinaya and the tudong life; the endurance, resolution, and sheer bloody-mindedness he showed in his practice; his love of solitude and simplicity; his blunt sense of humour – all these qualities inspired Luang Por.

Luang Pu Tongrat was the acknowledged leader of the group of monks who looked to Luang Pu Mun as their teacher, but retained their affiliation with the Mahānikāya Order. He was a great favourite of Luang Pu Mun and was renowned for his utter lack of fear. One much repeated (and perhaps apocryphal) tale recounts how Luang Pu Mun and a group of monks walking through the forest were surprised by a large wild pig. While other monks looked around instinctively for a way to escape, Luang Pu Tongrat strode up to the pig and gave it a resounding kick, at which the shocked animal ran back into the forest.

On another occasion, his eccentric behaviour had been upsetting a number of villagers. Returning to his monastery from alms-round one day, he discovered an anonymous, crudely abusive letter waiting for him. Rather than try to keep the matter quiet, he asked one of the monks to read the letter out loud for the whole Sangha to hear. He then asked that the letter be put on the shrine. This, he said, was also Dhamma: the worldly-dhamma of criticism. Understanding worldly-dhammas led to wisdom, and he wanted to pay his respects to this teacher. Luang Pu Tongrat died in 1956 in a small monastery a few miles away from the newly established Wat Pah Pong. Upon his death, the only possession to be found in his shoulder bag was a razor for shaving his head.

Details of the relationship between Luang Por Chah and Luang Pu Tongrat are obscure. In fact, the only account of any exchange between them at all is contained in the well-known story of their first meeting. In it, Luang Por enters an unnamed monastery and is met by Luang Pu Tongrat with the baffling words, ‘Oh, Chah, so you’ve arrived.’ Where and under what circumstances this event occurred and whether it was the first of many meetings or a one-off encounter, are all unknown. All that can be asserted with any confidence is that Luang Por looked up to Luang Pu Tongrat with the highest respect.

#### A PROBLEM WITH ROBES

After Luang Por had abandoned the life of the wandering mendicant, he would often, in the course of Dhamma talks to the Sangha, refer to his early days of practice. In relating his experiences as a young monk, he would emphasize his own weaknesses and the problems he had faced,

with a self-deprecating humour and frankness. As a pedagogical device, it was particularly effective. Many senior monks later commented how encouraging it had been for them to know that their teacher had entered the very same apparently boundless quagmire that they themselves were struggling through – and had come out on the other side. On one occasion, Luang Por recalled how, in his first year of tudong, he experienced a great craving for requisites and suffered accordingly.

When I entered the circle of forest monks, their requisites all seemed so beautiful. Their bowls were immaculate and the colour and texture of their robes looked so good. I didn't have a single piece of cloth that wasn't unsightly. I wanted a new upper robe (*jiwon*). I still didn't have a two-layered outer robe (*sanghāti*)\*. I was full of discontent.

The means by which a monk may acquire a new robe are strictly governed by the Vinaya. If he is resident in a monastery, he may request cloth from the monastery stores and sew one himself. If he is travelling far from his home monastery, it is more problematic. *Pamṣukūla*, or 'rag robes', provide one option. These days the word 'pamṣukūla' is familiar to most Thai lay Buddhists as the name given to robes formally offered to monks during funeral rites. In fact, the ceremonial offering of *pamṣukūla* cloth hearkens back to a custom from the time of the Buddha. Then, it was common for people to hang the cloth used to cover corpses from trees in the charnel ground before cremating the bodies. Monks would gather the discarded cloth, and then wash, cut, sew and dye it into robes. Monks who adopted this practice, much praised by the Buddha, were called 'rag-robe wearers'. To this day, any cloth discarded by its owner is called *pamṣukūla*.

Conscious of his desire for 'beautiful' robes, Luang Por determined that he would not act upon it in any way. He would make do with *pamṣukūla* cloth. This was not so easy to come by; but whatever the difficulty involved, he was determined to overcome his craving for fine requisites. He would make no effort to procure better robes. He would make no requests. He would only accept new robes if they were freely offered to him. The

\*See Appendix I for a visual guide to monks' robes.

gradual changes taking place in his mind became apparent after he took leave of Luang Pu Kinaree for another bout of tudong.

I went up to Sisongkhram District and Luang Pu Phut\* gave me an old robe that he'd been wearing for four years. I was so happy. The border was all torn, but I managed to find a discarded bathing cloth to make a patch. The colour of the patch didn't fit; it looked like the border stripe on the skirts that the local women wore. When I went on alms-round everyone looked at me. They stared so much that I felt discouraged. It was a problem. I felt so self-conscious that I re-dyed the cloth. But no matter how much I tried, it was just too old to take the colour well. Phra Khru Jun had said to let him know if I needed any requisites, but I was determined not to ask for anything and so I just carried on like that, until Ajahn Sawai, observing my patience and my way of practice, sewed me a robe. That made me feel good. If I'd asked for a robe from him at the start, I would have been uncomfortable about receiving it because it would have been acquired through expressing my desires.

My views had flipped over. Now I looked down on anything that had been purchased, or ordered or asked for. But if I acquired something without seeking it – even if it was not in particularly good condition, as long as it was still repairable – it seemed wonderful. On that trip to Sisongkhram, I had one small *angsa*.\*\* I couldn't ask for another. Doing so would have been a transgression. I didn't know what to do. I wanted a new one. My mind was restless and agitated. I worried about robes so much that I worked out how to make an upper robe. I planned out step by step what I'd do with the cloth, even though there was no sign of a prospective donor. While I was practicing walking meditation, I'd be marking out the robe in my mind. Whenever I got some cloth, I thought, I'd be able to get down to work straight away. I was obsessed.

\* An elderly monk. Not the famous friend and contemporary of Luang Por mentioned elsewhere in the text.

\*\* See Appendix I

On alms-round, all I saw were the markings on the cloth. I went through it so often in my mind that I worked it out. I was as concentrated on that imaginary robe as if I was a flea or louse who'd made it its home. I'd never seen anyone make the two-layered outer robe before, but I worked that out as well: I was so interested and I had such a strong desire that I gave it a lot of thought. I determined the method of sewing the robe and of attaching the border, every last detail, until I could do it, until I could visualize it all very clearly. So when I was eventually offered some cloth I was able to start straight away. Why not? I was proficient. I was able to cut the cloth and make the upper robe. And as for the two-layered outer robe, I was even more adept. How could I fail to be with that kind of obsession?

This is what is meant by the saying that wherever there is a passionate interest, there is success. Meditation is the same. If you're passionately interested, you don't sleep very much. The mind is awake; it's concentrating, it's looking – that's like that, this is like this – until you're proficient.

I'd been wearing my lower robe (*sabong*) for two years and it was almost threadbare. I'd have to hitch it up when I sat down. One day, I was sweeping leaves in the central area of the monastery at Bahn Pah Tao. It was hot and I was sweating. Without thinking, I squatted down for a rest without hitching the lower robe first and it ripped right across the backside. I had to borrow a layman's sarong. There was no patching cloth around and so in the end I had to wash out a foot-wiping rag and put the patch on the inside of the lower robe.

I sat down and thought to myself, 'Why did the Buddha make monks suffer so much? You can't ask for cloth, you can't do anything to help yourself.' I felt dispirited: both my upper robe and my lower robe were torn. I sat in meditation and was able to make a fresh resolve. I thought, 'Alright, whatever happens I'm not going to give up. If I've got no robes, I'll just go naked.' My mind was really fired up. I thought I'd take things to the limit

and see what it would be like. From then on, I wore robes patched front and back and gave up thoughts of changing them.

I went to pay respects to Luang Pu Kinaree again. While I was living with him, I wasn't like the others and neither was he. He was watching me. I didn't ask for anything while I was there; whenever my robes ripped a bit more, I found cloth to patch them. He didn't invite me to stay, and I didn't ask to stay, and yet, stay I did, steadily continuing my practice. We didn't speak to each other – it was almost like a kind of contest. Just before the Rains Retreat, he must have told the nuns that there was a monk come to stay whose robes were in tatters. He asked them to make a new set from some hand-woven cloth that had been offered a short while before: thick, sturdy material dyed in jackfruit dye. The nuns sewed the whole thing by hand using 'corpse-pulling thread'. I was overjoyed. I wore that robe for four or five years without it ever ripping.

But when it was new, the cloth was really stiff and didn't adapt to the shape of my body. The first time I put on the robe it looked like a big earthenware pot. As I walked, it made a loud 'suapsap suapsap' sound. With my outer robe worn on top of it, the extra two-layers of cloth made me look even more immense. If I'd worn that robe up a mountain and met a tiger, I'm sure it wouldn't have dared attack. Its roar would have died in its mouth. It would have been completely bemused by the stiff yellow figure in front of it. I didn't ever grumble about that robe, and after I'd been wearing it for a year or so it started to soften up. I wore that robe for a long time, and to this day I'm conscious of the debt of gratitude I owe to Luang Pu Kinaree for giving it to me without being asked. It was my great good fortune to be given that robe, and from that time onwards my feelings of discontent left me.

When I looked at my actions from the past until the present and into the future, it made me think that whatever volitional action isn't immoral, doesn't cause distress and makes one feel content and happy – that is good kamma. It was the view I held, and perceiving its truth made it seem that things were starting to fit

into place. And so, I accelerated my meditation practice for all I was worth.

#### AN UNSUNG VIRTUE

But the old demon of lust was by no means vanquished. During the hot season tudong of 1948 before returning to Luang Pu Kinaree's monastery, Luang Por found a suitable place for meditation practice at Wat Bahn Tong in Nakhon Phanom Province and decided to take a rest from his wanderings for a while. After some days, however, he came to feel uncomfortably conscious of the glances and modest smiles of one of the monastery's female lay supporters.

In Isan folklore, the naive monk entrapped and tempted to abandon his monastic vocation by a wily young widow is a common theme. Its popularity is perhaps due to the singularity of such a subtle courtship – initiated, cued and paced by the woman rather than the man. At Bahn Tong, the protagonist seemed to have stepped out of a minstrel's song. She was indeed a widow, one of the women who came to the monastery every morning to offer food. Unable to approach Luang Por directly, she sought to create a connection between them by endearing her son to him. It worked. Luang Por conceived a warm affection for the boy. His attraction to the woman became compounded by the tenderness he felt for her son.

Luang Por was used to keeping his own counsel. He did not reveal to anyone just how strong his feelings for this woman had become. However, the extent to which he felt his emotions were overwhelming his better judgement may be guessed by the way in which he resolved the problem. Early one morning, Postulant Gaew was shaken awake, and opened his eyes to see Luang Por looking down at him. Luang Por had his robe on, his bowl packed, and was ready to leave. The old man started to plead, ‘Can’t you wait until tomorrow morning?’ But he was immediately cut off. ‘No!’ Luang Por’s voice was gruff in the darkness, ‘We’re going right now.’

Luang Por’s rationale for his hasty retreat is apparent from teachings he gave his students in later years. In those instructions, he would emphasize that monks be honest with themselves about their weaknesses and not be

swayed by pride. If they had insufficient resources to deal with a challenge, then they should humbly accept that, make a tactical withdrawal, and work on developing the resources to be able to deal more effectively with the challenge the next time it occurred. The underlying conviction must be that physical lust is not a fixed part of a monk's nature that he can only hope to suppress. While it is certainly an immensely powerful and deeply ingrained habit of body and mind, it is one dependent on causes and conditions that can and should be completely eliminated through the practice of the Eightfold Path.

### A MIGHTY STRUGGLE

As related above, Luang Por returned to Luang Pu Kinaree's monastery before the beginning of the Rains Retreat and was soon presented with a new robe. He accelerated his meditation practice, keeping up his walking meditation practice even if the sun was fierce or the rain was pouring down, until the centre of his walking path was worn into a furrow. Luang Pu Kinaree, on the other hand, hardly walked at all. Sometimes he might be seen strolling up and down his meditation path two or three times and then sitting down in a shady place, to patch a piece of cloth or repair something broken.

I assumed that he was getting nowhere. He didn't practise walking meditation, he never sat for very long. He would just potter around doing this and that the whole day. 'As for me', I thought, 'I hardly take a moment's rest and I still haven't realized anything; if Luang Pu is practising like this, what can he ever hope to achieve?' I got it wrong. Luang Pu Kinaree knew far more than me. He seldom gave admonitions and those he did were terse, but his words were always profound and full of a keen wisdom.

Luang Por summarized the important lesson he had learned:

The scope of a teacher's vision far exceeds our own. It is the effort to eradicate the defilements within the mind that is the essence of practice; you can't judge the teacher by how much he sits and walks.

During this Rains Retreat, sexual desire – a thrashing, pounding storm of it – returned to assail Luang Por’s body and mind. It blew up at a time when he was putting great efforts into his practice. One interpretation might be that such single-minded introspection brought repressed desires to the surface. The most usual way for the forest teachers to describe this phenomenon however, is to personalize the defilements as tyrants who have held sway over the mind for countless lifetimes and who, now seeing a threat to their hegemony, react violently with the most powerful forces at their disposal. Whatever the explanation, Luang Por suddenly found himself in that hot damp forest, engulfed in a realm of vaginas. Eyes open or closed – tens, hundreds of the hallucinatory images surrounded him, devastatingly real. The power of his lust was almost unbearable – as fierce as the fear he had felt in the cremation forest. There was nothing to do but grimly endure.

Some explanation may be called for to make clear the full extent of Luang Por’s predicament. The Buddha taught that on the path to enlightenment, sexual desire can, and eventually must, be completely transcended. To this end, monks undertake an absolute form of celibacy in order to isolate and reveal the impermanent, unsatisfactory and impersonal nature of sexual desire, and thus uproot identification with it. The weight of the Discipline is thrown behind this practice by making intentional emission of semen one of its most serious offences (*saṅghādisesa*). If committed, it necessitates a period of penance and rehabilitation that is deeply embarrassing to the transgressor (he has to, for instance, publicly confess his offence to the Sangha on every day of the penance) and inconvenient for the community of monks. Even if he stops short of masturbation, a monk who makes the slightest deliberate attempt to excite himself sexually or physically relieve sexual feelings, commits an offence nonetheless (albeit of a less grave nature). He is given, therefore, absolutely no choice but to face up to the tension of lust. Until insight arises, a monk must be sustained by patient endurance, wise reflection, calmness of mind and confidence in the value of struggling with such feelings.

Luang Por was in constant fear of ejaculation. During this period, he did not dare practise walking meditation: he was afraid that if the friction of his lower robe stimulated his penis too much, he would be unable to

control himself. He asked a layman to make him a walking path deep in the forest so that he could walk there at night time with his lower robe hitched up around his waist. It was a full ten days before the alluring visions and the lust they engendered finally faded. Many years later, Luang Por told his oldest friend Por Phut, perhaps in jest (and perhaps not), that the vaginas belonged to all his wives of previous existences. Whatever their origin, this episode was to prove the one last great hurrah of his sexual nature.

Finding skilful means to deal with sexual desire is a major preoccupation for many young monks, and in later years, Luang Por was to speak of this incident to his disciples on a number of occasions. He was keen for them to see that such feelings were natural and that they could be transcended with determination. He himself had survived the onslaught, not through an intimidating amount of concentration or dazzling wisdom, but a good old-fashioned, unromantic, teeth-gritting endurance. In 1968, when a first, short biography of Luang Por was being written, he insisted that his vagina hallucinations be included. The author, his disciple Ajahn Maha Amorn, was rather uneasy about how such frank revelations would go down with the general public. It was not the kind of material usually found in such books. Luang Por said that if he omitted that passage, then he could just forget about the whole project.

The Rains Retreat at Wat Pah Bahn Nong Hee was not all blood-and-thunder grimness. On the contrary. One night as Luang Por lay down to sleep at the end of a long period of meditation, he was greeted by a vision of Luang Pu Mun standing in front of him holding out a glittering jewel. Luang Pu Mun said, ‘Chah, I’m giving this to you. See how bright and radiant it is.’ Luang Por sat up and stretched out his right hand to receive the jewel. At that moment, he woke up and found himself sitting on his mat, hand forming a fist, as if grasping something supremely precious. Luang Por’s spirits received a tremendous spur from that auspicious vision, and for the remainder of the retreat, he was fired by an unquenchable enthusiasm for practice.

Luang Por remained at Nong Hee until the hot season of the following year (1949), when, under a searing sun, he resumed his wandering once more. But first, following the ancient tradition, he offered to Luang Pu Kinaree

a tray of candles, incense and toothwoods\* that he had made himself from the astringent *kotah* tree, and asked forgiveness for any faults he might have knowingly or unknowingly committed during his stay. Luang Pu Kinaree praised Luang Por's dedication to practice but in his laconic way, warned him of the distractions that might arise with his gift for expounding the Dhamma:

"Venerable Chah, everything in your practice is fine. But be wary of giving talks."

#### VARIOUSLY HANDICAPPED

Some days into their walk, Luang Por and his new companion, Ven. Leuam, stopped overnight in a cremation forest. In the morning, after walking for alms in a nearby village, they were followed back to the forest by two teenage boys. The boys asked if Luang Por would allow them to follow him as students and attendants. Once Luang Por was sure that the boys' parents had no objection, he agreed. He was moved by the boys' resolution:

These two lads were physically handicapped, but they had faith in the Buddha's teachings and volunteered to share the hardships of the tudong life. They gave me plenty of food for thought. One of them had sound legs and eyes but was stone deaf. We had to communicate with him by making signs. The other one's eyes and ears worked normally, but he had a deformed leg that would sometimes get caught in the good one as he walked along and make him fall to the ground. They followed us because it was their own deepest wish to do so, and their handicaps couldn't deter them in any way.

The tudong monk has many hours a day to turn the light inwards on his mind which, as a result of the interest afforded it, often enters into a naturally reflective mode. The echoing call of a far-off gibbon, a small decomposing creature on the path, a sudden cooling breeze – the small events of the day and the feelings they evoke become raw material for

\*A traditional handmade toothbrush carved from an antiseptic hardwood vine with one frayed end for brushing and a pointed end for picking.

inquiry. Observations and insights, which for the non-meditator would normally be drowned by an incessant internal din, can acquire a powerful resonance. Walking along the bone-hard paths of Nakhon Phanom, accompanied by the incessant shrill of crickets from the neighbouring trees – some covered in blossoms of lush, improbable pinks, yellows and reds, others shrunken and desiccated – Luang Por felt his mind turning again and again to his new young companions.

Years later, he was to recount to his disciples some of the reflections the company of these boys provoked. Their courage and determination seemed to him an excellent example of the power of the mind to overcome obstacles. They did not choose to be born with such difficulties – it certainly was the last thing their parents would have wished – and yet their lives were dominated by them. As the Buddha had taught so often: all beings are born of their actions, are its owners and heirs. Nevertheless, Luang Por was reminded by these boys that, through a wise response to one's kammic inheritance, dignity may be found.

And, as he walked along the forest track and the rhythm of the steady pace led his mind into further reflections, he mused:

These boys are physically handicapped, but if they wander off the path and enter a thick forest they are aware of it. I too am handicapped – by the defilements in my mind. And if they lead me into a dark forest, then am I aware of it? The boys are of no harm to anyone, but any mind severely disabled by the defilements can cause untold turmoil and distress to other people.

#### SLEEPING ON AN OLD PATH

At dusk one day, the small group reached the edge of a thick forest; the moment they entered its shade they felt the temperature drop abruptly, and they revelled in the coolness. The forest encircled a steep-sided hill studded with harsh, rocky outcrops from which a stream gurgled down in defiance of the season: water to drink and water for bathing. Just visible across the rice fields was a small village on which they could rely for alms in the morning. It looked a good place to stop for the night.

As they scouted for places to put up their glots, Luang Por noticed a small overgrown path winding up through the jungle to the hillside. He was reminded of an old folk saying that he had never really understood, ‘Don’t lie down across an old path in the forest.’ He decided to ignore the advice and see what would happen. Luang Por sent Ven. Leuam off some distance into the forest and then had the two boys set up their places about half-way between the two monks. As for Luang Por, he put up his blot right across the overgrown path.

After bathing in the stream, everyone began to practise meditation. Luang Por did not let his mosquito net down so that the two boys could still see him if they felt afraid. Late that night, he finally laid down mindfully on his right side. Lying across the old path with his back to the forest, he faced outwards in the direction of the village. At first, it seemed that nothing would happen, that avoiding the path was simply another groundless superstition. But just as sleep was about to draw him inwards, Luang Por caught the faint sound of dry leaves crackling. Something large was moving towards him at a slow confident pace. As it got closer and closer, Luang Por could hear the sound of its breathing. He smelled on the wind the unmistakably rank odour that meant a tiger was approaching. He tried to lie as still as a rock, but one part of his mind panicked and he started to shake uncontrollably. Fear was short-lived however. He admonished himself:

Forget about this life. Even if the tiger doesn’t kill you, you’re still going to die anyway. Dying while following in the footsteps of the Buddha means something. If you’ve never killed and eaten a tiger in the past, then it won’t hurt you. If you have, let it eat you and settle the debt.

In times of intense fear, the Buddha taught monks to recollect the virtues of the Triple Gem. He likened its uplifting effect on the mind to the sight that an army’s battle standard has on a soldier in the heat of battle. Luang Por recollected the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and the purity of his own sīla as his refuge, and felt immediately fortified. Meanwhile, the tiger had stopped. It was motionless behind him in the night. Luang Por could hear it breathing about four or five metres away. He felt the awful tension of waiting for the quickening of that breath and

sudden lunge from behind him that would mean the end of his life. But now, the thoughts and fears were somehow outside of his mind. The tiger did not move. A few moments later, Luang Por heard it turn around and slowly return into the depths of the forest. The sound of crackling leaves gradually faded.

Perhaps it would only be fair to the almost-extinct Thai tiger to add that there are next to no known cases of one attacking a tudong monk. The tiger is by no means the most dangerous creature in the forest. When surprised or startled by a human being, especially a monk, it will almost always leave the scene with dignity. Not so with elephants. Although the Western image of the elephant tends to be of a genial beast who gives rides on its back, never forgets and has a penchant for cream buns, in the wild, it can be an unpredictable and casually violent colossus. Its way of dealing with annoying humans is either to stamp on them or grab them with its trunk and smack them against a tree. Luang Pu Mun considered bears the most dangerous creature and would give a special whistle to warn them of his coming. But fear is immune to logic and statistics. There is something about the tiger that is primeval and uniquely evocative. Luang Ta Maha Bua once spoke of meeting a tiger in the wild:

“If the fear is defeated, the mind will be overwhelmed by courage and enjoy profound inner peace. If fear is the victor, it will multiply itself rapidly and prodigiously. The whole body will be enveloped by both a perspiring heat and a chilling cold, by the desire to pass urine and to defecate. The monk will be suffocated by fear and will look more like a dying than a living man.”

Luang Por, suddenly propelled into what he perceived as a life-and-death situation, had summoned forth a power in his mind that he was not aware existed. He later said of this incident that, as soon as he gave up all concern for his life and simply let go without regrets or fear, he was filled with a deep calm and contentment that was accompanied by a mindfulness and wisdom of great keenness. His mind was bold and unflinching, ready to face whatever happened. It was a marvellous thing.

## THE GOOD PERSON

*Alone should a monk sit, alone should he rest.  
Without laziness, he should wander alone.  
Alone he should tame himself.  
Alone he should find joy in the forest life.*

*Dhp 305*

Luang Por began to experience an almost physical hunger for solitude. As his practice progressed, so also did the conviction that it was being hindered by the sense of responsibility he felt for his travelling companions. He realized that he had reached a point at which he needed to withdraw into himself and develop his meditation without external distractions. He discussed the matter with Ven. Leuam who offered to take the two boys home, and the next day their parting took place. Alone for the first time, Luang Por strode purposefully away. If a slight queasiness in the base of his stomach disturbed the feelings of excitement and exultation at a new-found freedom, he paid it no heed.

The following afternoon, Luang Por came upon a deserted monastery just outside the village of Bahn Kha Noi. It seemed an appropriate place for the work he had to do, and he put up his glot in the dusty hall. Alone at last, Luang Por felt untrammelled and free. He intensified his efforts, sustaining a close and alert awareness over his eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, not allowing his mind to seek the least distraction in the sensual world. This was the method, he knew, that was most effective in preventing a dissipation of mental energy and creating the supporting conditions for single-minded focus on a meditation object.

Sense impressions can have as much impact on the meditator as strong variable winds on a tight-rope walker. Indulgence in the pleasurable sound of a young woman's voice singing in a nearby field, or eating a little too much sticky rice at the morning meal are hardly evil acts. They can, nevertheless, throw the monk's mind frustratingly out of kilter for many hours. On alms-round, Luang Por kept his eyes steadily downcast, responded to the enquiries of the local villagers in a taciturn manner – right now he did not wish for social visits from the faithful laity – and

strived to keep a firm grasp of his meditation object on every measured step of the way. As soon as he had finished his meal and washed his bowl at the well, he would start with the first of the day's many hours of walking meditation. But even Luang Por's travel-hardened body could not measure up to the demands he made upon it. Before long, his feet were so swollen from his exertions that, reluctantly, he abandoned his walking practice and devoted himself exclusively to sitting meditation. It was three days before the severe pains in his feet subsided.



In the deserted monastery he dwelled in, small signs of former inhabitants were all around him. Candle wax drippings dotted the floor; behind the altar, there were discoloured books, eaten through by termites. It was a created solitude, one born of rejection, and therefore was sad in a way

that the most remote mountain top or cave could never be. One day, to his exasperation, Luang Por realized he was feeling lonely. One of his characteristic internal dialogues ensued:

I started thinking that it would be good to have a small novice or a postulant to help out with a few odd jobs around here. But then other thoughts started to challenge that line of thought, ‘You’re really something! Only a short time ago you were fed up with your companions. So now why do you want to find some more?’ Yes, it’s true I was fed up, but only with people who aren’t good companions\*. Right now, I need a good companion. ‘So, where are the good people? Can you search them out? You haven’t been satisfied with any of your travelling companions so far. You must think you’re the only good person around, to have left them behind and come here alone.’

Luang Por said that when that thought arose, he gained an insight that was to stay with him from that day onwards:

Where is the good person? It’s lying within us. If we’re good, then wherever we go the goodness goes with us. People may praise us, blame us or treat us with contempt, but whatever they say or do, the goodness remains. Without goodness, our mind constantly wavers: we’re angered by criticism and pleased by praise. Through knowing where the good person dwells, we have a principle to rely on in letting go of thought. If we go somewhere where people dislike us or say things about us, then we don’t consider that to be because they’re good or bad; we know that goodness and badness lie within us. Nobody can know us as well as we know ourselves.

## EXPLOSIONS

Luang Por continued on his wanderings looking for peaceful places to practise until one day he reached Bahn Khok Yao where he came across a deserted monastery about half a kilometre from the edge of the hamlet.

\*Here, Luang Por is apparently referring to good ‘Dhamma friends’, fellow strivers.

His mind felt light and tranquil. It was as if there was some kind of gathering of forces.

One night, there was a festival in the village. Sometime after eleven o'clock, while I was practising walking meditation, I began to feel a bit strange. In fact, this feeling – an unusual kind of calmness and ease – had first appeared during the day. When I became weary from walking, I went into the small grass-roofed hut to sit and was taken by surprise. Suddenly, my mind desired tranquillity so intensely that I could hardly cross my legs quickly enough. It just happened by itself. Almost immediately, the mind did indeed become peaceful. It felt firm and stable. It wasn't that I couldn't hear the sounds of merrymaking in the village; I could still hear them, but I could also choose to not hear them. It was strange. When I paid no attention to the sounds, there was silence. If I wanted to hear them, I could and felt no irritation. Within my mind, it was as if there were two objects standing there together but with no connection between them. I saw the mind and its sense object established in different areas like a kettle and a spittoon placed by a monk's seat.

I realized that if concentration is still weak, you hear sounds; but when the mind is empty, then it's silent. If a sound arises and you look at the awareness of it, you see that the awareness is separate from the sound. I reflected, 'Well how else could it be? That's just the way it is. They're unconnected.' I kept considering this point until I realized, 'Ah, this is important: when continuity (*santati*) between things is broken, then there is peace (*santi*).'<sup>1</sup> Formerly, there had been *santati*, and now, *santi* had emerged from it. I continued with my meditation. My mind was completely indifferent to all external phenomena.

If I'd wanted to stop meditating at that point, I could have done so at my leisure. Would it have been because I was lazy, because I was tired, or bored? No, not at all. There was nothing of that sort in my mind. There was simply an abiding sense of 'just-rightness'. If I'd stopped, it would have been merely that; there was no defilement involved.

Sometime later I stopped to rest. But it was only my posture that changed, my mind remained in the same state. I reached for my pillow, intending to sleep. As I laid down, my mind was still as peaceful as it had been before. Just at the moment that my head touched the pillow, within my mind there was a sense of bending or inclining inwards – where to I don't know. Then it was as if a switch released electric power into a cable. My body exploded with a tremendous bang. The awareness at that moment was extremely subtle. Having passed that point, it slipped way inside to a realm of nothingness. Nothing could find its way into that place, nothing could reach it. The awareness stopped there for a short while and then withdrew. But I don't mean that it was an intentional withdrawal; I was merely the witness, the knower. My mind steadily withdrew until it had returned to its normal state.

Once my mind had reverted to normality a question arose, 'What happened?' and the answer appeared, 'These things are natural phenomena; there's no need to be perplexed by them.' Those few words were enough for my mind to accept what was going on. After a short pause, it started to incline inwards again and at a certain point met the same switch. This time, my body disintegrated into fine fragments, and I slipped within again. There was a completely impenetrable silence; it was superior to the first time. After an appropriate length of time, my mind withdrew. Everything happened automatically. I didn't exercise any will or influence on what happened; I didn't try to make things happen according to a plan, to enter that state or leave it in any particular way. I just maintained awareness, simply kept observing. My mind withdrew to a normal state again, and I didn't speculate about it. I sat there in contemplation, and then it occurred for a third time and the whole world disintegrated – earth, vegetation, trees, mountains, people. Everything became the space element. It was an end of all things. At this final stage, there was nothing at all.

I dwelled in that state for as long as it wanted me. I don't know how such a place could exist; it was difficult to fathom and it's

difficult to talk about. There's nothing that it could be compared to. The third time the mind stayed in that realm was the longest, and when the time was up, it withdrew to a normal state. Those three times – what could they be called, who could know?

I've been describing the natural state of the mind. I haven't spoken in the technical language of consciousness (*citta*) and mental concomitants (*cetasikā*), because it's not necessary. I had the faith to get down to the practice. To stake my life. When it reached the time for this kind of thing to emerge, the whole world turned upside down. If anyone had seen me then, they might have thought me insane. In fact, for someone with no self-possession, that kind of experience might drive them insane, because after it, nothing is the same as before. People don't look the same anymore. But actually it's only you who's different – different in every way. Their thoughts go in one direction, and yours go in another. They talk about one thing, and you talk about another. They go up there, and you come down here. You're completely at odds with the human race.

#### WRONG THINKING

Luang Por continued his practice at Bahn Khok Yao for almost three weeks and then set off walking once more. As he passed through the small villages of Sisongkhram, he felt a profound sense of calm and fluency pervading his mind. The Dhamma flowed effortlessly, both in answering his own doubts and also those of the villagers that, some nights, would come to his glot, bearing offerings of tobacco and betel nut,\* lit by their smoking torches.

Luang Por crossed over the Mekong River into Laos for a short period in order to pay his respects at a famous shrine. After returning to Isan, he decided to rest at a monastery outside Bahn Nong Kah. At that time, his old iron bowl had a number of cracks and small holes in it, and the abbot

\* As smoking is not expressly forbidden in the Vinaya, and the health hazards associated with it were not known at the time, many forest monks of Luang Por's generation smoked. The Sangha of Wat Pah Pong outlawed the practice in the late 1960s.

offered him a replacement. It was another opportunity for him to reflect on his desires for requisites and to be reminded that his practice was still not as unshakeable as he would like. At Bahn Khok Yao he had experienced a profound level of peace, but now, not too much later, defilements led him astray once more.

They offered me a bowl, but it was cracked and it had no lid. Then I remembered once as a child taking the water buffaloes out to graze and seeing other lads carving vines and weaving them into hats. So I asked for some rattan. I wove a disk and a rectangle and then joined them. I had my bowl-lid – the only thing was it looked like a sticky rice basket. On alms-round, it was a real eyesore. The villagers referred to me as the ‘big bowl monk.’ I just dismissed it.

I tried again. I worked day and night on it. It was the wrong kind of effort, fired by craving. At night time, I would light a torch and work alone in the forest. Weaving the strips backwards and forwards, I knocked against the end of the torch and drippings from it scalded my hand – I still have the scar to this day. I came to my senses: ‘What am I doing? I’m thinking about this in the wrong way. I’ve become a monk, and now I’m going without sleep just to get robes and a bowl. This is the wrong sort of effort.’

I put down the work. I sat and thought things through, and then I practised some walking meditation. But as I walked back and forth, my mind returned to the bowl-lid and I went back to the work, completely absorbed, until just before dawn. I was tired; I took a break and began to meditate. As I sat, the thought came again, ‘This is wrong.’ I started to drowse a little, and I saw a vision of a huge Buddha. He said, ‘Come here. I am going to give you a Dhamma talk.’ I went towards him and prostrated. He gave me a discourse about the requisites; he said that they are merely the accessories of the body and mind. I woke with a start, my body shaking. Even now I can still hear the sound of his voice in my ear.

I'd learned my lesson. I'd been blinded by desire, but now I stopped. I worked for a reasonable time and then rested, walked and practised sitting meditation. This was a really important point. Formerly, whatever work it might be, if it was still unfinished and I put it aside and went to meditate, my mind would still be attached to it; I couldn't shake it off. However much I had tried to lever it out of my mind, it wouldn't budge. So I took this as a mental training: a training in abandonment, in putting down.

Whatever I did, I determined not to finish it quickly. After working on the bowl-lid for a while, I would go and practise meditation; but whether I was walking or sitting, my mind would be wrapped up in the bowl-lid and wouldn't concentrate on anything else. I saw how difficult it is for the mind to let go. It clings so tenaciously. But I gained another principle of contemplation: don't hurry to get anything finished. Do a little and then put it down. Look at your mind. If it's still going round and round with the unfinished work, then look at how that feels. That's when it starts to be fun. Go to battle.

I was determined not to stop until I had trained my mind to the point that when I worked, I just worked; and when I stopped, I would be able to put the work down in my mind. I would make work and rest separate, discrete, so that there would be no suffering. But it was extremely difficult to train in that way. Attachments are difficult to abandon, difficult to put down. The idea I'd had of getting things over and done with as soon as possible wasn't exactly wrong; but from the point of view of Dhamma it's not correct, because there's nothing that you can know once and for all if your mind refuses to stop.

I came to reflect on feeling. How can you let go of pleasant and unpleasant feelings when they are still present? It's the same as with the bowl-lid ...

So this was the principle: don't do anything with the thought of getting it finished. Put it down at regular intervals and go and practise walking meditation. As soon as my mind went back to

worrying about the work, I'd tell it off, oppose it. I'd train myself, talk to myself alone in the forest. I just kept fighting! Afterwards, it was less of a burden. As I kept practising, I found it easier to separate work from rest.

After that, whether it was sewing robes or crocheting a bowl-cover or whatever I was doing, I trained myself. I could do it, or I could put it down. I got to know the cause of suffering – and that is how Dhamma arises. Subsequently, whether I was standing, walking, sitting or lying down I felt a radiance and enjoyment that lasted until, finally, the bowl-lid was finished. But on alms-round the villagers still looked at me and my bowl with baffled expressions. Sometime later, I remembered having once seen a kind of tray in someone's house in Bahn Kor that would make a reasonable bowl-lid. So that's what I did: I got hold of a tray, bent the edges up, soldered them, and used that as my lid. I never thought of asking anything from anyone.

But Luang Por's tribulations were not at an end. Iron alms-bowls demanded a lot of attention. Monks had to be constantly on their guard against rust. One method of protecting the bowl was to varnish it.

Later on, I remembered that as a novice I'd once seen a monk using the sap of the *giang* tree to varnish his bowl. So I thought I'd give it a try. I went down to Bahn Khok in Loeng Nok Tah District because there's a lot of *giang* wood down there, and I painted my whole bowl and the lid. A layman suggested putting it in a basket and lowering it down into a well so that it would dry more quickly; three days and it should be ready to use. Fat chance. I waited over a month and it still wasn't dry. I couldn't go on alms-round; I couldn't go anywhere. During meditation, thoughts of concern for the bowl would arise. I spent my whole time lifting the basket up and down that well to check on whether the varnish was dry. I really suffered. In the end, I realized that even if I left it in the water for a year, it probably wouldn't work. So, I asked a layman to bring some paper to wrap around the outside of the bowl; then, at least, I could go on alms-round. I was afraid of the

kammic consequences of asking the laypeople for a new one. I just endured.

#### TEACHINGS FROM A BARKING DEER

On a number of occasions referred to above, Luang Por's distinctive way of reflecting on Dhamma has been revealed. It consisted of a robust internal dialogue. A series of questions and answers, or a debate between two opposing viewpoints, took place in his mind until the truth was arrived at, some valuable lesson learned, some decision made. That skill was in evidence again, and probably saved his life, in the heart of the mountains of Nakhon Phanom.

Luang Por had not come across a village for a few days and he was starting to become weak from lack of food. He felt tired and light-headed, his legs were rubbery climbing uphill and his breath short. And then a fever struck. As he lay in the shade of a tree too exhausted to move, he took stock of the situation: little water, no sign of a village – and his body on fire. As Luang Por made peace with the realization that his chances of survival were low, a disturbing thought arose in his mind: suppose a hunter should discover his corpse and send news back to Ubon. How distressing and inconvenient it would be for his family to have to come such a long way to arrange a funeral. He groped in his bag for his monk's identification booklet. If the worst came to the worst, he would burn it so that nobody would ever know who he was. Just then, he was roused from these sombre thoughts by the sound of a barking deer echoing loudly through the forested valley below. It made him ask himself:

Do barking deer and other creatures get ill?

Yes, of course they do. They've got bodies just as we do.

Do they have medicines? Do they have doctors who give them injections?

No, of course not. They make do with whatever shoots and leaves they can find.

The creatures in the wild don't have medicines, they have no doctors to look after them and yet they don't seem to die out. The forest is full of them and their young, isn't it?

Yes, that's true.

These simple thoughts were enough to shake Luang Por out of the despair that was enveloping his mind. He struggled up into a sitting position and forced himself to sip some water. He crossed his legs and started to meditate. By morning, the fever had abated.

#### WEAPONS OF DHAMMA

Speaking to his disciples decades later, Luang Por spoke fondly of his tudong years:

In those days, I didn't even have a water filter; requisites were very hard to come by. I had a tiny aluminium dipper that I was very possessive of. I still smoked in those days. There were no matches then, but I had a bamboo tinder box with half a lemon skin as a cap. At night time when I was weary from walking meditation, I'd sit down and light a cigarette. I reckon that if there were ever any spirits around, the sound of striking that flint, 'bok! bok!', in the middle of the night would have frightened them all away.

When I look back on the days when I was practising alone, it was painful and full of the most challenging ordeals, but at the same time, I really enjoyed it. The enjoyment and the suffering went together. Pretty much the same as eating grilled *peka* leaves dipped in chilli sauce and ground ginger. It's delicious – but it's hot! You're eating it and the snot's flowing down, but you can't stop because it tastes so good. You're eating away and at the same time you're groaning, 'Oh! Oh!' That's what the practice was like in those days.

You have to be really resolute to practice Dhamma. It's not a light thing. It's heavy! You have to put your life on the line. A tiger's going to eat you, an elephant's going to trample you – then, so be

it. You think like that. When you've kept your precepts purely, there's nothing more to worry about: it's as if you're already dead. If you die, then it's as if there's nothing to die, and so you're not afraid. This is called the weapon of Dhamma. I've been on mountaintops all over the country, and this single weapon of Dhamma has always triumphed. You completely let go. You're bold. You're ready to die. You risk your life.

As I thought about it, I saw how the weapon of the Buddha strengthens the mind. It's the best of all weapons. I kept reflecting, looking, thinking, seeing. When the mind truly sees, it penetrates things completely: suffering is like this, the cessation of suffering is like this. And so, there's ease and contentment. Someone who sees suffering but doesn't penetrate right through it, who's content with feelings of inner peace – they have no way of knowing this.

If someone is unafraid of death, if they're ready to give their life, then they won't die. If you let suffering go beyond suffering, it comes to an end. Comprehend it, see the truth of things, see the nature of things. That has real value: it makes the mind powerful. Do you think it would be possible for such a mind to be afraid of anybody, to be afraid of the forest, to be afraid of wild animals? It is staunch and strong. The heart of a meditation monk is incredibly resolute. Through meditation, anybody who is ready to give their life for the Dhamma develops a mind that is great in size and scope, utterly firm. The ability to let go becomes sublime.

All this is called *vitakka*:<sup>\*</sup> raising something up in the mind, and then *vicāra*: examining it. These two things keep working together until the matter is fully penetrated. At this point, rapture (*pīti*) arises in the mind ...

As I thought of practising walking meditation or of the virtues of the Buddha or the Dhamma, the rapture seeped through my

<sup>\*</sup>In this paragraph Luang Por explains the five mental states that define the first state of deep absorption concentration (*jhāna*).

whole body and thoroughly refreshed it. As I sat there, my mind overflowed with joy in my actions – all the obstacles I'd overcome – and my hair stood on end and tears started to fall. I felt even more inspired to struggle and persevere. There was no question of discouragement arising, whatever happened. There was vitakka, vicāra, rapture and a bliss accompanied by awareness. The mind was upheld by the vitakka and vicāra, and stabilized by the bliss. At that moment, you could say it was dependent on the power of absorption (*jhāna*) if you like, I don't know. That's just how it was. If you want to call it absorption, then go ahead. Before long, vitakka and vicāra were abandoned, rapture disappeared and the mind had a single focus (*ekaggatā*), samādhi was firmly established, and the lucid calm that is a foundation for wisdom had arisen.

So I gained the insight that it's through practice that knowing and seeing take place. Studying and thinking about it is something else altogether. Even the thoughts and assumptions you make about how things will be are included in the things that you see clearly, and they are revealed to be in contradiction to the way things are.

So now I was content. Fat or thin, healthy or ill, I was content. I never wondered where my mother was or where this or that friend or relation was. There was none of that. I just resolved in my mind that if I died, then I died, and that was all there was to it. I had no worries. That was how firm my mind was. And so, there was no more holding back. My mind was invigorated and pushed me on.

However many Dhamma talks you listen to, however much you study, the knowledge you gain from that doesn't take you all the way to the truth, and so it can never free you of doubts and hesitation. You have to practise. If your knowledge is a realization of the truth, then things come to a conclusion. I don't know how you'd put it into words, but it just happens naturally, it's inevitable. It's nothing other than the 'natural mind' (*pakati citta*) arising.

That year, Luang Por spent the Rains Retreat in a small monastery of the Dhammayut sect. Although Luang Por was now a monk of ten years standing and dedicated to maintaining the Monks' Discipline scrupulously, he was still affiliated with the Mahānikāya Order, in which the general attitude towards the Vinaya varied between relaxed and downright lax. For this reason, Mahānikāya monks would not usually be accepted for long term stays in Dhammayut monasteries. This monastery made an exception for Luang Por, with the condition that he retained his status as an āgantuka, or 'visiting monk' – that is to say, he would not be considered a full member of the community, and his seniority would not be recognized in formal situations (this protocol was, and in many places still is, common, although the position usually taken these days is that it is required by the difference in lineage). The unspoken rationale, as has been mentioned above, was that Mahānikāya monks were, at worst, not proper monks and, at best, impure ones.

It might be expected that having put so much effort into studying the Discipline, Luang Por would find this judgement galling, but he remained unfazed. He was well aware of the standard upheld in Dhammayut monasteries and was willing to accept it. As he was to say later, he reflected that what he was didn't depend on how other people treated him.

In fact, the seriousness with which Luang Por took the Vinaya was to have ironic consequences. An incident during the retreat revealed him to be more scrupulous in keeping to the Vinaya than the leader of the strict community that had grudgingly accepted him. The incident concerned the rule that states that a monk may only consume foodstuffs that have been formally offered into his hands. The commentary to the rule stipulates that if a monk should deliberately touch un-offered food, then not only he, but any monk whosoever, may not eat it, even if the food is subsequently offered to him in the correct manner. One morning, after returning from alms-round, Luang Por returned to his kuti, which was situated near to the kitchen. Happening to glance through the kuti's window, he caught sight of the abbot acting strangely. Standing near a charcoal fire on which unattended bamboo sections of sweet rice were beginning to burn, he seemed caught in a moment of indecision. Then,

mind made up, the abbot, known for his fondness for sweet rice, after looking left and right, quickly turned over the bamboo sections.

At the meal, the old abbot noticed that Luang Por was not eating any of the roasted sweet rice. He asked him innocently whether he had taken any and Luang Por's even, polite denial caused the abbot's face to turn a deep red over his bowl. A few seconds later, he loudly confessed his offence to the embarrassed community.

This episode seems to have made a deep impression on Luang Por. At least, twenty years later, it was one of the few stories of his tudong travels that he related to his biographer. But to anyone other than a Buddhist monk, the significance of the anecdote is not so easy to fathom. It may seem that the abbot acted sensibly. He saved the rice from burning at the expense of some minor infringement of the rules; common sense won the day.

For a forest monk, this is a story of integrity. The Vinaya is an honour system: no police force or external authority compels monks to follow the rules. Great value is put on honesty and integrity; concealing offences is considered especially blameworthy. There are no exemptions to the rules for senior monks. On the contrary, the elders in a community are expected to be the most scrupulous in their adherence to them. For a senior monk to succumb to sense desires, to commit an offence in full awareness (first checking for witnesses), to conceal the offence, and then compound it by eating the food made un-allowable, would have compromised his position of authority. Luang Por's quiet refusal of the food meant that he was taking the strictest possible interpretation of the rule. His discretion pricked the offender's conscience where confrontation might have led to more denial or conflict.

#### DEATHLY MESSENGERS

The monastery was bordered by a cremation forest, in the heart of which stood a small open-sided pavilion. It was in this secluded spot that Luang Por would spend much of his time. One day, while he was practising sitting meditation in the pavilion, a crow swooped down to the branch of a nearby tree and began to caw loudly. Luang Por paid it no attention. Seeing his indifference, the crow glided down from its perch and placed

the dried grass it held in its beak on the ground in front of him. It stood there staring at Luang Por for a while and crowing insistently, ‘Caw! Caw! Caw!’ Luang Por was struck by the strangeness of the crow’s behaviour. It was as if the grass was some kind of gift or sign. As soon as the crow noticed it had caught Luang Por’s interest, it abandoned the grass on the ground and flew away. Three days later, the villagers carried the body of a thirteen-year-old boy into the forest. He had died of a fever, and they cremated him by the side of the pavilion.

Three or four days after that, the crow came to visit Luang Por again, bearing with it another mouthful of dried grass and acting in exactly the same way as on the previous occasion. Within a few days, the brother of the first child was borne into the forest, victim of a sudden and inexplicable illness. After another three day interval, the crow returned once more, and shortly afterwards, with a grim inevitability, the corpse of another child was brought into the forest for cremation. This time, it was the elder sister of the two boys. The parents and close relatives of the dead children followed the funeral bier, bowed and shrunken with grief. The sight of the third young corpse and the desolate funeral party filled Luang Por with an intensely ‘cool and sober sadness’.

The phrase ‘cool and sober sadness’ is a translation of the difficult Thai term *salot sangwet*<sup>\*</sup>. The problem in rendering this phrase accurately is not merely one of language. It is a term that employs everyday words to describe an unusual experience, one that arises as a result of Buddhist meditation and, as such, not fully accessible to non-meditators, even Buddhist ones. It is both like and unlike ordinary sorrow; it is an elevated or transfigured sorrow. Intensive Buddhist meditation practice engenders within the mind a profound receptivity to the truth of the human condition. The daily tragedies of human existence are seen in a fresh context. Events are experienced as external expressions of an all-embracing insubstantiality. With his faculties heightened by meditation, Luang Por watched the pain of the ragged group of mourners dragging past him. The suffering that is inseparable from love was revealed in all its rawness. He was filled with *salot sangwet*.

<sup>\*</sup>‘Sangwet’ is derived from the Pali ‘*samvega*’, usually translated as ‘sense of urgency’.

The suffering that Luang Por witnessed in the cremation forest aroused him to even greater efforts. He further increased his hours of meditation practice and reduced still more his already meagre hours of sleep. He would keep practising walking meditation even as the rain poured down and created puddles around his feet. If, as a rice farmer he had ploughed the fields in such weather, he reasoned, why could he not endure the rain for the sake of this far more valuable work?

In one meditation session, Luang Por had a powerful vision. He saw himself walking along a road and passing by an old man wracked by pain, groaning pitifully. He stopped but did not move towards the man. After contemplating the sad figure for some time, he walked on. Further along the way, he saw a body lying in the dirt by the side of the road. It was a man on the point of death, severely emaciated, his breath weak and fitful. Luang Por stood contemplating the sight, and continued on his way. Lastly, he came across a bloated and discoloured corpse. Its eyes protruded grotesquely, its swollen black tongue crammed the mouth, teeming with maggots. Once more, he contemplated the sight and walked on. The sense of sober sadness these images evoked was all-encompassing. They remained clearly in his mind's eye in the following weeks, deepening his growing disenchantment with conditioned existence and his strong desire for liberation from the attachments that still bound him to it.

During this period, Luang Por also experimented with fasting. But it brought him no gains in tranquillity of mind, merely heat and discomfort in his body. He concluded that it was a method unsuited to his temperament and returned to his former practice of eating once a day. The Buddha's teaching of the three cardinal, or 'invariably correct', principles of spiritual development – moderation in eating, sense-restraint and constant wakefulness – made more and more sense to him, and they were to form the basis of many Dhamma talks to his disciples in later years. He renewed his emphasis on continuity of practice rather than extreme asceticism, and his practice advanced smoothly as a result. With mind free from hindrances, his investigation of Dhamma was, for the moment, skilled and unobstructed.

At the end of the retreat, the resident Sangha prepared to set off on a tudong trek into Laos. By this time, their attitude to Luang Por was much changed, and they tried to persuade him to accompany them. But Luang Por declined: a nagging problem had now arisen in his meditation, and he needed to seek expert advice. Parting ways with his companions of the past few months, he made his way to Langka Mountain in order to visit Ajahn Wang, a disciple of Luang Pu Mun.

I'd reach so far and then stop. I'll make a comparison: it was as if I was walking along and then stopped, sank down to the ground and was unable to proceed. Then I'd go back – I'm talking about my awareness, you understand, about my mind. I persevered, but I'd just keep coming back to this same place and find myself at an impasse. Halted. That was one kind of feeling. The other was like this: I'd actually collide with a barrier before turning back.

I kept up my walking and sitting meditation, but I'd keep finding myself back at this same place. ‘What is this?’ I asked myself. ‘Whatever it is, just ignore it,’ came the reply. After a fairly long time, it ceased; but shortly afterwards, it returned. There was a constant demand for an answer in my mind, ‘What is this?’ During the day, outside of meditation sessions, this question would be there. My mind was disturbed and kept pressing for an answer. I didn't see this thing for what it was, not to the extent of being able to let it go, and so my mind kept following it around.

I started to consider who might be able to help me with my problem, and I thought of Ajahn Wang, who I had heard was living on top of Langka Mountain with a couple of novices. I didn't know him personally but thought that he must have some kind of accomplishment to be able to live in such a way.

Luang Por climbed up the mountain and spent three nights discussing Dhamma with Ajahn Wang. Many years later he related their first conversation:

Ajahn Wang said, ‘Once, as I was walking, I stopped and contemplated my body sinking down through the ground into the earth.’

I asked him, ‘Were you fully aware of what was happening, Ajahn?’

He replied, ‘I was aware. How could I not be? I was aware. As I kept sinking further and further down, I told myself to just let things take their own course. Then I reached the furthest point and started to rise up again. But when I reached the surface, my body didn’t stop there; within moments, I was way up in the air. I just maintained my awareness. It was amazing how such a thing could be happening. I rose and rose until I reached the level of the treetops, and then my body exploded: *BOOM!* And then, there were my intestines, hanging like garlands from the tree branches.’

I said, ‘Are you sure it wasn’t a dream, Ajahn?’

Ajahn Wang shook his head, ‘No, it wasn’t a dream. If I hadn’t maintained my presence of mind, then it might have carried me with it. It really happened in that way. As it took place, I perceived it to be real. To this day, I still remember it as something that actually happened. When *nimittas*\* can be of that magnitude, then what is there to say about any lesser kinds? If your body exploded, how would you feel? What if you saw your guts all wrapped around a tree? It was an incredible experience. But I realized that it was a nimitta. I was firm in that. I was confident that there was nothing that could harm me. Then I focused my awareness on the mind itself and soon the vision disappeared. Then I sat thinking, ‘What was that?’

‘Ajahn, I’ve come to pay my respects to you because I’m at a complete loss what to do. My experience is different from yours; it’s as if I’m walking on a truncated bridge that doesn’t reach to the other side of the river. I stop. There’s no way ahead and I don’t know what to do, and so I turn around and go back. This is

\*See Glossary, 813.

during my meditation. Or sometimes I carry on right to the end, but there's nowhere to go and so I return. Other times, there's some kind of obstacle blocking the path, and I collide with it. I can't go any further. It's been like this for a long time now. What is it, Ajahn?

Ajahn Wang explained it to me, 'It's the end, it's the furthest limit of perception. When it occurs, in whatever form, then just stand right there and be aware of that perception. If you stand right there, it will be resolved; it will change by itself, without the need for any force. Simply be aware of the nature of the perception and the state of your mind. Focus your awareness and then shortly the perception will change. It will change rather like the perceptions of a child change into those of an adult. As a child, you liked to play with toys, but as an adult, you see those toys, and you have no wish to play with them. You play with other things.'

'Oh. I see now.'

Ajahn Wang said, 'Don't speak too soon! There's so many things that can happen – so many things. Just remember that in samādhi anything can happen. But whatever occurs, it doesn't matter as long as you don't get caught in doubts about it. When you can maintain that awareness, then these phenomena start to lose their significance. The conditioning power of the mind peters out. Maybe you look closely and see a duck. And before long, the duck has changed into a chicken. You keep your eyes on the chicken, and within moments it changes into a dog. You watch the dog, and then it's a pig. It's confusing, there's no end to it.

Focus on the mind, concentrate on it, but never think you've come to the end of these kind of phenomena, because before long they'll return. But you keep putting them down. You merely acknowledge them and let go. Then there's no danger whatsoever. Focus on them in that way so that your mind has a solid base. Don't chase after them. Once you've solved this problem, then you'll be able to carry on. There'll be a gap to pass through. Old perceptions or any new ones that arise in the future are all of

the same basic nature; it's merely that some are more vivid and powerful than others. But no matter how marvellous or sublime such visions might be, don't make anything of them. That's just the way they are. You must really cultivate this understanding.'

I asked him, 'Why is it that some people seem to have no problems. They don't suffer at all. They meet no obstacles and everything goes smoothly for them?'

Ajahn Wang said, 'It's the result of kamma. For you, this is a time of struggle. When the mind converges, then there's contention for the throne. Not everything that is contending is bad, mind you: some things are good, some are pleasurable. But they're all dangerous. Don't give importance to any of them.'

Luang Por's mind was cleared of doubts. He felt a great surge of energy and spent the next few days practising vigorously day and night, hardly stopping to rest. His mind was now able to go beyond the barriers it had erected for itself, and he was able to investigate the four elements of solidity, cohesion, vibration and heat that constitute the physical world, as well as both the true and conventional nature of reality. After three nights, Luang Por paid his respects to Ajahn Wang and resumed his journeying. He reflected on the value of a wise friend:

Yes, you can practise on your own, but it can be slow going. When you have only your own way of looking at things, you can get caught in a circle going round and round a particular problem; but if there's someone to point out the way, it's quick. There's a new path of contemplation to pursue. That's how it is for everyone: when we get stuck, we stick tight.

I walked down from Langka Mountain and at its base I came to a deserted monastery. Just then it started to rain, and I went to take shelter underneath the wooden Dhamma Hall. As I contemplated the elements, the mind suddenly became firm. Immediately, it was as if I'd entered another world. Whatever I looked at was changed. I felt that the kettle in front of me was not a kettle. The spittoon was transformed and so was my bowl. Everything had changed its state, in the way that your hand seems to if you flip it

over from front to back. It was like a cloud suddenly obscuring the blazing sun. It happened in a flash. I saw a bottle and it wasn't a bottle, it wasn't anything, it was just elements. It had only a conventional reality, it wasn't a true bottle. The spittoon wasn't a true spittoon; the glass wasn't a true glass. Everything had changed. It changed back and forth, and then I brought the awareness inwards. I looked at everything in my body as not belonging to me, but as all possessing a merely conventional reality.

As a result of this experience Luang Por summarized:

Don't be hesitant in your practice. Give it everything you've got. Make the mind resolute. Keep practising. However much you listen to Dhamma talks, however much you study, although the knowledge that results may be correct, it doesn't reach the truth itself. And if that's the case, then there's no end to doubts and hesitation. But when the truth is realized, there's completion. Then whatever anyone might say or think on the subject is irrelevant, it is naturally and irrevocably just that way. Others may laugh or cry, be happy or sad, but when the 'natural mind' has arisen, it is completely unwavering ... The mind that has entered the stream\* is not easy to distinguish from the mind of someone crazy. The two are very similar; they both deviate from the norm; but they differ in the qualities they possess.

## FIRST DISCIPLES

Luang Por decided it was time to return to Ubon, and after stopping to pay his respects to Luang Pu Kinaree, he set out on the long walk southwards. As on previous journeys, he rested at Bahn Pah Tao in Yasothon province. The villagers were pleased to see him again, and many came out in the evenings to hear him discourse on the Dhamma. One night, a couple who had been faithful supporters since his first visits to the village asked if he would accept their teenage son as an attendant and train him for

\*'Stream-entry' is the first of the four levels of enlightenment revealed by the Buddha.

Ordination into the monkhood. Luang Por assented, and some days later, the slight figure of Tongdee, head newly shaven and dressed in fresh white robes, followed Luang Por out onto the road.

After a journey of some ten days, the two travellers reached Bahn Kor and put up their glicts in the cremation forest. Soon Tongdee was joined by a lad called Tiang and the two of them prepared for the novice Going Forth ceremony together. When they had learned the necessary chanting thoroughly, Luang Por took them to one of the large monasteries in the local town where its abbot conducted the ceremony. These two boys may thus lay claim to be considered Luang Por's first two disciples.

During his stay at Bahn Kor, Luang Por's mother, relatives and friends all came to pay their respects. There would be a group of women following him back after alms-round bringing side dishes in the *pinto* food carriers hanging from poles on their bony shoulders. Dishes such as bamboo-shoot curries, fermented fish, chilli sauce, leafy morning glory and bitter *sadau*, *okrong* mangoes and *namwa* bananas – the best of whatever they had – were all offered to Luang Por and the two shy but ravenous novices to eat with their inevitable ball of sticky rice. Then in the evenings, after their dinner, the village women would come again, accompanied by their men this time, all back from the fields and rested.

Luang Por had not been home for a long time, and everyone was keen to see him, some perhaps as much to hear of his adventures in distant parts as to listen to Dhamma. This was the pre-television age when oral traditions were still strong, and Luang Por was a compelling speaker who could cast a spell on his listeners with the sheer power and flow of his words, similes and anecdotes. It would be late at night before the villagers returned to their homes, still basking in the afterglow of his oratory. And Luang Por was, in a certain sense, on a mission: he was intent on persuading his mother to keep the Five Precepts strictly. The more he practised, the more confidence he had in the teachings and often his thoughts turned to Mae Pim and how he could inspire her to develop in the Dhamma. She was one of his first successes.

To his old friends, Luang Por had changed. The outgoing and effervescent Chah they had once known now seemed more reserved, inward, some-

what aloof. But their sadness was tempered with respect and a sense of the rightness of it; the ideal of the monk and the behaviour appropriate to him was familiar to them, and it inspired them.

After fifteen days, Luang Por and the novice Tongdee set off walking southwards towards the District of Kantharalak, leaving novice Tiang at Wat Bahn Kor. They put up their glots in a large unspoilt forest outside the village of Suan Kluai. It was a fine place to practise, lay support was strong and Luang Por decided to stay for the Rains Retreat.

#### AUSPICIOUS DREAMS

Although the short biography of Luang Por, written in the late 1960s, is an important source of information for the present chapter of this book, it consists of little more than a number of random anecdotes woven together in a formulaic style. There are large and frustrating gaps in the story. In 1981, as Luang Por's health started to rapidly decline, two of his senior Western disciples decided to interview their teacher and garner more information about his early life, with a view to writing a new biography. They set off with a new tape recorder and many blank tapes in great anticipation but returned a few days later looking glum. Apart from one or two stories of his prodigious appetite for Chinese noodles as a young monk, Luang Por had been almost completely uncooperative. The only interesting answer he gave, if rather a puzzling one, was in response to queries about the most important event of those early years. Luang Por cited the three auspicious dreams he had on consecutive nights at Suan Kluai.

It is rare that the details of someone else's dreams make for enjoyable reading, whoever the dreamer might be. There is nothing especially fascinating in Luang Por's dreams. But as he gave them such importance, and was able to relate them in such detail many years afterwards, they are included in their entirety below.

In the first dream, someone offered him an egg which he tossed onto the ground. The shell broke and two chicks ran out, which he caught, one in each hand. They then immediately changed into delightful small boys just learning to walk. A voice announced that the one in his left hand

was called Boon Tong (literally ‘merit-flag’) and the one in the right, Boon Tam (‘Dhamma-merit’). After a while, Boon Tong caught dysentery and died nestled in his hand. The voice said, ‘Boon Tong is dead, and now, only Boon Tam remains.’ Then Luang Por woke up. The question arose in his mind as to the significance of the dream and the answer appeared in response: it was merely a natural phenomenon. His doubts subsided.

In the second dream, he found himself pregnant. His belly was swollen, and it was difficult for him to move around; and yet at the same time, he still felt that he was a monk. Just before he was ready to give birth, he was invited to take his meal in a thatched hut in the middle of a field bounded by a stream. There were already three monks upstairs in the hut, and they had started their meal. Luang Por was close to the time of birth, and so the laypeople invited him to eat down below by himself. As the monks above ate, Luang Por gave birth to a radiantly smiling boy with soft hair on the back of his hands and soles of his feet.

Luang Por’s stomach felt shrunken. He felt as if he’d really given birth and checked to see if there was any blood or fluid to be cleaned up, but it was dry. He was thus reminded of the birth of Prince Siddhartha. The laypeople started to discuss what would be the best thing for a monk to eat, who’d just given birth, and they decided on three grilled doctor-fish. Luang Por felt exhausted and didn’t want anything, but he forced himself to eat so that the donors would make merit. Before starting his meal, he gave the child to the laywomen to hold, and on finishing, they gave it back. As he received it, the child fell from his hands and he woke up. Again, when the doubt arose in his mind as to what the dream meant, simply by reminding himself that it was a natural phenomenon and nothing more, his mind was put to rest.

The next night, Luang Por dreamt once more. This time, together with a novice, he had received an invitation to take his meal on a mountaintop. The path twisted up around the mountain like the whorls on a snail shell. It was a full moon day and the mountain was very high, its peak cool and verdant. An exquisite piece of cloth had been made into a sunbreak for them, and they sat down in its shade. After some time, they were invited down to a cave on the mountainside. Luang Por’s mother, Mae Pim, his aunt Mae Mee and a large number of laypeople were waiting with

offerings of food. Mae Pim had brought watermelon and other fruits; Mae Mee had brought grilled chicken and duck. Luang Por joked with his aunt that, if that was the sort of food she was fond of, she should move into town. She smiled broadly in response. After the meal, Luang Por gave a Dhamma talk and then woke up.

The meaning of the dreams is not obvious, although the first would seem to symbolize Luang Por's choice of the spiritual over the material. The second dream may well refer to his enlightenment and the third, his decision to teach. The fact Luang Por never thought it necessary to explain the dreams is an important consideration. If anyone had suggested interpretations to him (and only a Western disciple would have been so forward), his most likely response would have been to laugh and tell them not to think so much.

#### DHAMMA MEDICINE

At the beginning of 1951, Luang Por left Suan Kluai for Bangkok where he visited the famous meditation master Luang Pu Sot in his temple in the suburb of Pak Nam. He arrived in a subdued Bangkok. It was a hard, dark time of incessant power struggles in the capital. One coup attempt had occurred in 1949, and another was soon to take place. In the meantime, the American-backed Field Marshal Phibun was in the midst of a ruthless campaign to suppress dissent to his rule (among those particularly feeling his ire were politicians with the fledgling and short-lived Isan separatist movement). Although Luang Por walked the same hot pavements that had recently seen blood spilt, he moved through a different world, intent only on protecting his mindfulness amongst the rush of scooters and the enticing smells of the roadside stalls.

Politics, in which transient forms of craving and suffering were played out on a national stage, were of no interest to Luang Por. He was searching for the root of things, and he maintained this aloofness from the passions and prejudices of the day throughout his life, even in the later years of prominence and fame. He is not known to have ever expressed an opinion on a political matter. His concerns were always with matters that, in his own words, 'have an end'.

After a few days learning about Luang Pu Sot's way of practice, Luang Por decided to continue his travels onwards to the former capital of Ayutthaya, which lies some 80 kilometres upstream from Bangkok on the banks of the Chao Phraya River. His destination was Wat Yai Chaimongkhon, an historic monastery now administered by the Dhammayut Order, whose resident community was loosely affiliated with the Luang Pu Mun group. It was to be Luang Por's home for the next year.

Unfortunately, Luang Por hardly ever spoke of his experiences at Wat Yai Chaimongkhon. Externally at least, there was probably little to tell. He had by now built up a considerable momentum in his practice and was most in need of a quiet, stable environment free from disruptions, to consolidate and further develop the steady progress he had been making. This was exactly what this monastery provided him. The abbot, Ajahn Chaluai, was keen to offer support, and Luang Por took the opportunity to immerse himself in practice, secluded from laypeople and without external responsibilities.

The only anecdote passed down from this period is of another severe illness. In his first year at Ayutthaya, Luang Por fell ill with a serious complaint in his digestive tract that produced a painful swelling on his left side. The intense discomfort it caused was aggravated by the return of an old asthmatic problem. He was determined not to go to the local hospital and decided to treat himself by fasting and meditation, a regime traditionally referred to as '*Dhamma osadha*' or 'Dhamma medicine'. For eight days and nights, subsisting on plain water and completely abstaining from sleep, he threw everything into his meditation practice. The results exceeded his expectations. He revealed afterwards how amazed he'd been at the marvellous potential unlocked when his mind had been forced into a corner. The value of pushing oneself to the edge, to do more than one thinks one can do, was to be a recurrent theme in later teachings. After eight days, Luang Por felt the illness to be abating, and when Ajahn Chaluai requested Luang Por to start eating again, he readily complied. All his illnesses had disappeared, and they did not return.

## IV. NEW DIRECTIONS

### RETURN TO ISAN

In the hot season of 1952, Luang Por made his way to Ubon once more. He had been away for two years and his arrival in Bahn Kor caused a stir in the small village. In the evenings, he gave Dhamma talks of a power and persuasion that had never been heard before. This was a fresh, vital Buddhism, relevant to the villagers' daily lives, expressed in language they could all understand. And yet it would be going too far to suggest his visit provoked revolutionary changes in the community's spiritual life. The number of people that did not go to listen to him was probably larger than that of those that did. Indeed, some members of his own family were completely indifferent and remained so for many years afterwards. Everywhere in the world, it seems, old perceptions die hard. A common response, and one against which Luang Por would, in the future, wage a long struggle, was that what he said was true but beyond the capacity of ordinary people to live by. Be that as it may, Luang Por had already sowed a number of seeds in his home village. There was now a group of people, led by his mother, who hoped that, before too long, Luang Por would come back for good and establish a monastery in a forest not too far from Bahn Kor.

Luang Por walked northwards. He had decided to return once more to Bahn Pah Tao and spent the Rains Retreat, his fourteenth, at Tam Hin Taek, a mile or so outside of the village. Now, a number of monks and novices were starting to gather around him,\* and he led them in an austere and vigorous regimen. Often, they would sit in meditation or practise walking meditation for the whole night. One time, Luang Por explained (presumably he had overheard some grumbling) that he wanted them to go beyond attachment to conventions of day and night, times to meditate and times to rest:

If we stop creating any distinctions between night and day, we can forget about time altogether and put forth a constant effort.

\*These included Tongdee (later to disrobe) and Tiang who Luang Por had left in Bahn Kor to study the first level of the Nak Tam Dhamma exams and prepare for Ordination.

A sense of the warrior spirit that Luang Por was trying to instill in the monks is given by Ven. Tiang:

“Luang Por noticed me regularly drinking herbal medicine, and he asked me whether I’d been taking it for a long time and I said yes, for a number of years. He asked me if the condition was getting better, and I said not really. He was silent for a moment, and then he said, ‘You’ve been taking this medicine for a long time now and it’s still not cured you. Throw it away. Try a new kind of treatment: eat little, sleep little, talk little and do a lot of sitting and walking meditation. Give it a try. If it doesn’t work, then just be ready to die.’”

Luang Por would stay on at Bahn Pah Tao until the following Rains Retreat of 1953. That year, he left Ajahn Uan, a disciple of Luang Pu Kinaree, in charge of the Sangha at Tam Hin Taek and spent the three months alone in a small hut, on a hill called Phu Koi about three kilometres away. Every morning after alms-round, Luang Por would take his meal with the community and, after ensuring that all was well, would return to his hermitage. The only exception to this was on the full moon and dark moon nights when he would walk down to the monastery to participate in the formal recitation of the *Pātimokkha* and to offer his disciples some rousing instruction.

The schedule that Luang Por established for the Sangha during this retreat was of an intimidating intensity. No rest was permitted during the night. The monks and novices were expected to practise sitting and walking meditation until dawn, when they would set off on an alms-round of between three and six kilometres. The return walk from the village was a gruelling slog: on a completely empty stomach, with their big iron bowls heavy with sticky rice and after a sleepless night, they would sweat profusely under the weight of two thick robes. The daily meal would be sometime after eight o’clock, and by the time they had distributed the food, eaten it, washed their bowls and cleaned up, it would be almost ten. On returning to their kutis, the monks would air their robes, practice walking meditation until weariness overcame them and then, as mindfully as possible, collapse on their rush mats for some well-earned rest.

At three in the afternoon, a bell would be rung as a signal for the daily chores – sweeping along the paths and central area of the wat, sweeping and wiping down the Dhamma Hall, and hauling water from the well. At six o'clock, the bell would be rung for evening chanting and another night's meditation would begin. For the first two months, the monks could sit and walk as they wished, but in the third month, the screw was turned even tighter: they were required to keep one posture – sitting or walking – for the whole night. Luang Por, orchestrating from afar, was practising, if possible, even more vigorously.

#### ILLNESS THE TEACHER

While staying alone on Phu Koi, Luang Por fell ill with an agonizing inflammation of the gums. Rather than seek medicine, he chose to endure the affliction. His previous experience of meditating through pain and illness in Ayutthaya had been so successful that he determined to try it again. In this case, the illness itself was not life-threatening. It provided an opportunity to work with physical pain.

Like many seasoned meditators before him, Luang Por saw physical pain as an acid test of his ability to sustain clarity of mind in the most challenging of situations. A meditation practice that could not withstand physical discomfort was seriously flawed; one that could transcend it, immensely powerful. Although it is true that the Buddha emphasized the value of good physical health and roundly criticized the excesses of the various deny-the-body-free-the-spirit religious groups of his time, it is also undeniable that generations of monastics have experienced significant progress in their practice through rising up to the challenge of illness. A prolonged period of physical discomfort firmly handcuffs meditators to the nitty-gritty, and much is to be learned. Pain affords little room for self-deception. Dealing with illness and pain provides undeniable proof of how well meditators have developed their ability to protect the mind from anxiety, resentment, fear and depression when faced with the unpleasant. If fear of death is still lurking in the mind, it is exposed.

Luang Por patiently accepted the pain. He alternated between using his powers of concentration to suppress it, and with making the pain itself the object of his contemplations. With the mind steadied in a calm

equanimity, he was able to investigate the inevitability of pain and disease to the human body, and to penetrate its impermanent and impersonal nature. After seven days, Luang Por recovered. The pain in his gums had faded and was gone.

#### FOR THE WELFARE OF MANY

At the end of the Rains Retreat, Luang Por left his mountain hermitage and returned to Wat Tam Hin Taek. When the rains were over and the cold season had begun in its characteristic way – one night unannounced, with gusts of the north wind, like a stranger pounding at the door – he asked the monks and novices to move out of their kutis and into the surrounding forest. Each person chose a solitary spot, put up his glor at the foot of a tree and continued his practice alone. Once a week, on Observance Day, Luang Por would give a Dhamma talk to the group. In the words of one young monk, ‘It felt like we were young plants beginning to wilt and his talk was a cool shower of rain.’

The monastic community continued practising in this way until the end of February 1954, when Luang Por’s mother, Mae Pim, his elder brother Por Lah and a small deputation of villagers from Bahn Kor came to visit. They had heard the news that Luang Por had abandoned his wanderings and was now the leader of a community of monks. They came as representatives of the people of their village with a formal request: would he please, out of compassion and for the welfare and happiness of them all, establish a forest monastery near Bahn Kor. Luang Por assented.

Despite its harshness, the people of Isan retain a warm affection for their land and wherever they go in search of work – and these days they may be found all over the world – they rarely forget their home. Filial piety and *kataññū-katavedī* – a sense of gratitude for and a wish to repay all that one has been freely given – are amongst the most treasured values of the Isan people. They draw people’s minds back to their home village almost inexorably. In the meantime, they send monthly remittances to their parents and spouses, often a sizeable percentage of their wage.

Monks are not indifferent to such sentiments. Although forest monks may often lose contact with their families for many years in the early part

of their monastic life, many eventually find themselves drawn back to their home district. A great many of the forest monasteries in Isan are situated outside the home village of the founding abbot, and in the nuns' section, one can commonly find the abbot's mother and one or two of his sisters. Once monks are confident in their own practice and consider establishing a monastery, their thoughts inevitably turn to repaying the debt of gratitude they owe to their parents and to giving something back to the village in which they grew up.

It may well be that the thought of going to live in the forest close to Bahn Kor was already in Luang Por's mind. Certainly, the acceptance of his family's invitation was a prompt one – it was almost as if he had been waiting for it – and within a few days he was on the road. With the benefit of hindsight, the period at Tam Hin Taek appears as an interlude or, perhaps more accurately, a prelude. Luang Por was gaining experience training monks for the first time; he was experimenting with various kinds of group practice that he would go on to develop further at Wat Pah Pong; he was preaching – marvellously – to the villagers. Luang Por's readiness to accept this invitation surely indicates a feeling that he had achieved, to some significant degree, the goal for which he left Wat Bahn Kor eight years before. Put simply, he was ready to return.

After the excited laypeople had set off on the long journey home, Luang Por called a meeting of the Sangha. It was decided that Ven. Tiang, Ven. Tongdee and a few of the novices would stay on at Wat Tam Hin Taek, while the rest of the Sangha would accompany Luang Por. At the beginning of March, he started out on a final long walk: back to Ubon and forward to a new chapter in his life.





III

*off the beaten track*

*Inspiring are the forests in which worldlings find no pleasure. There the passionless will rejoice, for they seek no sensual pleasures.*

Dhp 99

# *Off the Beaten Track*

*Wat Nong Pah Pong*<sup>\*</sup>

## I. SETTLERS

### PONG FOREST

It was on the eighth of March, 1954 that Luang Por Chah and his disciples made their way along the cart track running westwards from Bahn Kor on the last leg of their journey to Pong Forest. Afternoon temperatures at that time of year regularly exceed 35 degrees, but the oppressive heat would have cooled slightly as they approached the dense forest and the path became increasingly stippled and striped by the shade. In the late afternoon, as the gorged red sun was starting its descent ahead of them, the monks strung up their *glots* at the edge of the forest, amid the hum of mosquitos and the deafening shrill of cicadas.

Pong Forest held strong associations for Luang Por. An abiding memory of his childhood was of his father walking there one morning with some friends to offer alms to the great Luang Pu Sao, who was camped out in the forest practising meditation. That evening, the young Chah had listened with fascination to his father's account of their expedition. It was the first time he had heard about wandering monks living austere

\*The monastery's official title is 'Wat Nong Pah Pong', but on all but the most formal occasions, it is referred to as 'Wat Pah Pong'. 'Wat' means monastery; 'Nong' is a pool of water; 'Pah' is a forest; 'Pong' is an indigenous wild grass.

lives in the jungle. He always remembered how impressed his father had been that Luang Pu Sao ate all his food from his alms-bowl, rather than from plates as the village monks did. And he also recalled his father's slight puzzlement at Luang Pu Sao's teaching style, 'It wasn't like a proper sermon at all', he had said, 'it was just like normal talking.' Many years later, Luang Por's recall of the day was still strong:

When I set off and started practising, the memory of my father's account was constantly with me. Whenever I came back home to visit, my mind would always turn to this forest ... Ajahn Dee from Phibun and Ajahn Phut\* once passed through there, and the villagers invited them to stay – Ajahn Phut still speaks of it to this day. Ajahn Dee said, 'This isn't our place. We can't stay. It won't be long now, and the owner will arrive.'

The following morning, after finishing their daily meal, the group of monks entered the thickly tangled forest for the first time. Villagers from Bahn Kor moved in front of them, expertly hacking a way through the stubborn vines and luxurious undergrowth with their machetes. Eventually, at the cool heart of the forest, they halted. No photographs were taken of this auspicious occasion. It is unlikely that anyone present that day had ever seen a camera, much less used one. But imagination may supply a picture: the wiry villagers, sweat running down the protective spells tattooed on their chests, squatting in a circle and rolling cigarettes. With Luang Por at the foot of an ancient and imposing mango tree, the monks sit some distance apart, drinking water from their bamboo flasks and tranquility from the air around them.

A group of women had been following in the monks' wake. They soon joined their men-folk in methodically removing all the vines, stumps and thorns in the neighbourhood of the old mango tree. Clearing land was work at which the villagers were adept, and a central open area soon started to take shape amongst the larger shade-bearing trees, creating a neat, stately and almost park-like atmosphere in the midst of the thick and matted jungle that surrounded them. At the foot of some of the larger

\* Better known as 'Luang Por Phut', this disciple of Luang Por Sao was a good friend of Luang Por Chah and, for many years, was the abbot of Wat Pah Saensamran located some six kilometers from Wah Pah Pong.

trees beyond the edge of this area, small squares of land were cleared for the monks to set up their glots. The monks themselves, forbidden by the Vinaya to dig the earth or destroy plant life, helped by dragging the cut branches into the forest and sweeping the cleared areas.

There was a break at midday for the villagers to eat their lunch – sticky rice and fermented fish brought from home and fresh forest leaves gathered along the way. Then with the sun overhead, filtering down between the large patches of shade in bright, hot pools, it was back to the steady rhythm of the work. By late afternoon, a rudimentary path had been cut to the edge of the forest. After taking their leave of Luang Por, the laypeople made their way along this new path for the first time, hurrying a little in order to reach their homes before dark. In the heart of the forest, as darkness set in, the monks, in their glots, sat in meditation.

Early one morning a few days later, a group of volunteers from Bahn Kor and Bahn Klang arrived to build huts for the monks and expand the open area. They brought with them sections of thin *ya kha* thatch for the roofs and cut the main posts and beams from the trees around them. The men deftly split bamboo into long strips to weave into floors while the women attached large, dry *chat* leaves to bamboo frames for the walls. Four huts were completed by the evening: simple dwellings, but sufficient for the monks' needs. The flimsiness of these shelters could not conceal their significance. Their creation, in the space of a day, had transformed the monks' presence in the forest from that of respectful guests of its peace and shade, into settlers.

Pong Forest, the monks' new home, possessed a certain notoriety amongst local people. In former days, the now-dry freshwater pool towards its northern end had attracted many wild animals, including tigers and elephants. Adding to the forest's daunting reputation was the widespread belief that a harsh and vengeful guardian spirit had vowed to protect it from human intrusions. Luang Por, who was generally very forthright in his criticism of baseless superstition, did not counter this belief. On the contrary, he frequently referred to the spirit by name – Por Daeng. He once explained to some guests:

When I first came to stay here, it was a hard place to live: there were none of these buildings you see now, nothing but forest. It goes without saying that there were no roads, and coming in and out was very difficult. The local farmers lived a long way away. They didn't dare to come into the forest because the guardian spirit here was so fierce. This spirit was once an elephant herder who would often pass through the forest on his expeditions to capture elephants and would water them at the pond on the way back. In the end, he settled down here to look after the forest, and it's thanks to him that, by the time I came to live here, there was still some of it left. Otherwise, it would probably all have been cut down long ago. A number of years ago, some villagers from Bahn Bok and Bahn Peung did clear a patch of land and plant some rice and vegetables, but all of them came to an unfortunate end. People who have come in and cut down trees have tended to die from mysterious causes. Wild potatoes grow abundantly in the forest, but nobody's dared to touch them. It was only after I'd come to live here that people started to farm more closely to the forest edge.

#### STRANGE VISIONS

The full moon day of March marked the first Observance Day since the monks' arrival in the forest. About a dozen laypeople came to spend the day and night chanting and meditating with the monks. At seven o'clock, the evening chanting completed and the last light of the day fading away, Luang Por began to expound the Dhamma, his voice energetic and compelling. As the words flowed more and more surely, his form was illuminated by the rays of the newly risen moon. Then, quite without warning, arrested in full spate, Luang Por suddenly fell silent. Many of his listeners found their eyes jerking open in surprise to be greeted with the view of their teacher sitting in the moonlight as still and composed as a Buddha image. After a few moments, he spoke to them, 'Everyone just sit calmly. If anything strange occurs, there's no need to be alarmed.' And then, without further explanation, he resumed his discourse.

A few minutes later a bright light, like a comet, appeared in the sky to the northwest. Passing over their heads, it then dropped earthwards to the southeast of the small cleared area in which they sat, bathing the whole forest grove in a dazzling light. Despite the forewarning, monks and laypeople were profoundly thrilled at what they saw as an auspicious portent for the new monastery. Luang Por, however, paid no attention to the light whatsoever and carried on with his Dhamma talk as if nothing had happened. Gradually the spell and power of his words re-asserted their hold over his audience.

Luang Por was never to refer to this matter again. Nevertheless, the following morning when he led a small group of laypeople to mark the limits of the new monastery with stakes, it did not pass unnoticed that the boundaries he chose, enclosing an area of some 150 rai\*, were governed by the points at which the strange light had risen and fallen. It was not the end of mysterious lights. Mae Noi, one of the villagers who would spend the Observance Day nights practising in the monastery and had been present on the first occasion relates:

“In those days it wasn’t as easy to get to the monastery as it is today. Those of us from Bahn Kor who wanted to go and listen to the Dhamma on Observance Day nights would follow a narrow track which passed through some scrubby forest. Some sections of this track were thickly overgrown with *khah* grass. One night there was quite a big group of us including Por Phut, but we still managed to get lost out by Python Pond. Just as we were standing there discussing which way to go, we saw a bright light hovering over the tips of the large mango tree, and we headed into the forest towards it. The undergrowth was thick with grass and tangled vines, but we kept on struggling through it with the light as our goal. We assumed that a big hurricane lamp had been suspended in one of the trees. When we thought of how kind Luang Por was to put up a light to guide us, all our weariness disappeared. Finally, we reached the clearing where the monks lived. There was no light at all. We were amazed.”

\*The rai is the Thai unit of area. 10 rai is equivalent to about 4 acres or 1.6 hectares.

It would be inaccurate to describe the establishment of Wat Pah Pong as signalling the birth of the Forest Tradition in Ubon. It is impossible to tell how many hermitages have quietly flourished and declined in the last few hundred years or how many flimsy kutis have been swallowed by the forest. Some fifteen years earlier, Luang Pu Sao had returned to Ubon determined to spend the last years of his life establishing the Forest Tradition in his native province, and a few small monastic communities had resulted from his efforts. Nevertheless, it is clear that Luang Por Chah settling in Pong Forest was a most significant development. Wat Pah Pong was to become a training centre for forest monks who, within thirty years, would establish over sixty branch monasteries throughout the province, and many more in adjoining provinces of south and southeast Isan.

Wat Pah Pong was established without capital and with no plan of development. Luang Por's belief was that if the Sangha practised sincerely, the material evolution of the monastery would gradually take care of itself, because lay Buddhists, inspired by the monks' dedication, would offer the necessary funds of their own volition. In the long term, buildings would be needed, but they were not an urgent or overriding concern. The important thing was the monks' practice. The Vinaya forbids monks from any kind of fund-raising effort; they are taught to be content with whatever is offered out of faith, however much or however little, whether of good quality or poor. Luang Por followed these injunctions to the letter. If it was going to take ten or twenty years to build a proper Dhamma Hall, then so be it. He was certainly not going to sell his integrity for bags of cement.

Every morning, the monks went on alms-round, ate their one daily meal, and then spent the rest of the day at their practice. Faithful villagers provided the things they needed. Everything else they simply did without.

The arrival of Luang Por and his monks was a talking point in local communities for a few days. But the villagers had their work to do and when the novelty of the forest monks had worn off, so did much of the interest in them. The majority of villagers thought it was a good thing, in general,

to have a forest monastery nearby, and they appreciated the opportunity to put food in the forest monks' bowls in the morning, but their lives continued unchanged. The cultural identity and the opportunities for making merit provided by the village monasteries were as much as most people expected or sought from religion. Although a few people maligned the forest monks as misguided zealots, a certain number of villagers were deeply inspired by the forest monks, becoming regular supporters of the new wat and disciples of Luang Por.

For a number of years, the physical conditions in which Luang Por and his disciples lived were very austere. The gap between their standard of living and that of the people in the villages surrounding the monastery was not, however, a large one. 'Find in the morning, eat in the evening' is a Thai idiom that well expresses the poverty of most inhabitants of rural Ubon in the mid-1950s. If the monks had little to eat with their daily ball of sticky rice and patched their robes until they fell apart, the local villagers were hardly better off. Cash or disposable income was still in short supply. What little money people did have was kept aside for times of illness. If they had a few spare coins for merit-making, their first obligation was to support their local village monastery. For these reasons, funds for the material development of Wat Pah Pong were slow to appear. It was not considered a problem. There was no standard length of time laid down for building a monastery. If money was offered, some construction took place; if not, it didn't.

#### REQUISITES

The monks had three main robes\* made of thick cotton, supplemented by one or two *angas* and bathing cloths. The upper robe (*jiwon*) and the lower robe (*sabong*), if looked after and patched as they began to wear thin, could last for three or four years, and the double-layered outer robe (*sainghāti*) much longer. Both larger robes could double as blankets at night. Bedding consisted of a rattan mat and a folding wooden pillow that the monks usually made themselves. Their other requisites consisted of a glot, a shoulder bag, a sitting cloth, water-filter, needle and thread. They had no

\* See Appendix I

footwear. Candles and matches were hard to come by. Water for drinking and general use was drawn from a well. To make fire:

You'd stuff kapok into a length of bamboo, leaving one end open with half a lemon skin as a lid. Then you'd strike the flint to get a spark and light the kapok in the tube.

Walking around at night was dangerous.

You'd come down from your kuti in the thick, black darkness, raise your hands in *anjali* above your head and say, 'Sādhu! With the power of the virtues of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha,

*Sabbe sattā sukhitā hontu.*

*Sabbe sattā averā hontu.*

*Sabbe sattā abhyāpajjhā hontu.*

May all beings be happy ... and please leave me be!'

In the middle of the night it was pitch black, you couldn't see a thing. It was easy to tread on something on your walking path without seeing it. In fact, I trod on snakes a number of times – there's a lot of those small venomous pit vipers around – but they never bit me.

Cloth was in very short supply. If a robe became ripped, its owner would be expected to patch and darn it until the cotton reached a terminal, tissue-paper stage of decline, at which every slight strain would tear it. Only then would the monk be issued cloth from the monastery store to make a new one.

Ajahn Tiang\* remembered:

"For the first three or four years, we sewed by hand. Sometimes, after cutting the cloth for a robe, the whole Sangha would sit down and help with the sewing. Then the robe would be dyed in jackfruit dye. By the time

\*The 'Venerable Tiang' of the previous chapter went on to become a senior monk, and will henceforth be referred to by the honorific 'Ajahn'. Other figures referred to as Ajahn in this and following chapters may be understood to be monks who also went on to become senior disciples.

it was finally ready to be worn, a couple of months had passed. Making the full set of three robes was no easy thing. To get enough dye, you had to keep the wood chips boiling on the fire for hours and hours – that is, if you could get hold of any cloth to make the robes to dye in the first place. Bowl covers we had to crochet ourselves. It was difficult. If there had been as many monks as there are these days, I don't know how we would have managed. It was hard, but Luang Por kept it all going."



#### ALMS-FOOD

Alms-food was basic at best. Usually the monks would return from alms-round with little more than sticky rice. Only rarely would there be a few bananas or dried fish to augment it. The Isan tradition, especially in the

countryside, was to make alms-round an almost ritual offering of rice, and then afterwards to take side dishes (literally ‘with rice’) – curries, fruit, sweets, edible leaves etc. – to the monastery and offer them at the monks’ meal time. It was a custom that maintained a close daily relationship between the Sangha and the laity. But it was not a system that worked so well when the monks lived a long walk away from the village. Although few people could find time to go to Wat Pah Pong in the morning, they were slow to change their alms-giving habits. Plain rice was still the most common offering on alms-round. Consequently, as they returned from the village, the novices – unhampered by the Vinaya rules that prohibited the monks from destroying plant life – would stop to pick edible leaves from the trees by the path. These leaves, dipped in chilli sauce, would relieve the monotony of the heavy rice.

Four women – Luang Por’s mother, Mae Pim, and three other elderly villagers – came to live in the monastery in that first year, and they tended a herb garden to supplement the alms-food. Maechee Boonyu Pimwong, who arrived a few years after the maechee community was established\* and went on to become the senior nun, remembers the hardships of those days:

“The food that was left over from the monks would be distributed amongst the maechees. However much that might be, there was never any left over. If the monks got nothing, then we would go without as well. We’d never try to procure food from elsewhere. Sometimes, there would be an invitation for the monks to eat in a layperson’s house and there would only be two or three monks left to go on alms-round. There were ten of us. After we’d shared out the rice, each of us would be left with a ball the size of a lemon – and so that’s how much we’d eat. There was nothing to go with it, but we knew how to get by with plain rice. One time, I remember the monks came back from alms-round with three bananas between them. Luang Por had one of the monks cut them into thin little

\*The Wat Pah Pong maechee community will be dealt with at length in a future chapter. Here it is sufficient to note that, although maechees did not go on alms-round and were not forbidden the use of money, Luang Por treated them as monastics. They were expected to keep to most of the practices that were standard for the monks.

slices and distribute them. That day those three bananas fed the whole community.”

To hungry young monks, the daily meal consisting of a ball of sticky rice with a dab of chilli sauce and not much else, could still be delicious. Ajahn Jun was one whose appetite was never blunted by the frugality or monotony of the food. Until the end of his life, he cherished the memory of looking up from his bowl one day to see Luang Por’s eyes upon him. Self-conscious, he stopped eating, painfully aware of how much he had been enjoying his meal. But his embarrassment subsided in an instant. He realized that the look on Luang Por’s face was not disapproval; the heedless disciple was not about to be scolded for gluttony. What Ajahn Jun remembered seeing in Luang Por’s expression that day, he said, was the warm, generous smile of a father watching a ravenous son tucking in after a hard day’s work in the field.

Luang Por said of those days:

I never sat around wasting my time trying to think up ways to get hold of this or that kind of food. As far as I was concerned, plain rice was enough to survive on. And that went for the people that had the faith to come to practice here as well: Ajahn Jan, Ajahn Tiang, Ajahn Sinuan and the rest. I’d make an announcement that today there would be a hot drink in the afternoon, and everyone would come and drink it quietly – not coffee or cocoa or anything sweet, but *borapet*.<sup>\*</sup> Nobody complained about its bitterness. There was nothing else, and so that’s what we drank.

In later years, when lay support for the monastery had grown and food and drink were more plentiful, Luang Por would often recall the early hardships. He would constantly remind the monks that they had no right to be well-fed. Frugality was not an austerity imposed through circumstances, but a virtue to be cultivated.

At least we had something to eat every day, and even if it was only plain rice, it was better than going without. Eating plain

<sup>\*</sup>*Borapet* (*tinospora crispa*), also known as heart-shaped moonseed or guduchi, is an extremely bitter concoction prepared from a local vine. It was much used as a prophylactic and treatment for malaria.

rice would make me think of dogs. In poor areas, the villagers feed their dogs with just a small lump of sticky rice once a day – nothing with it, just plain rice – and they don't die, they get by alright. And what's more, those dogs are really diligent and wakeful guards. They only have to hear the sound of leaves rustling and they start barking. When their owner takes them hunting, they run really fast because they're so lean. Whereas the dogs who are well looked after by their masters get lazy. Anyone can walk right up to them – almost step on their head – and they still don't wake up.

## MEDICINES

Throughout his life at Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por showed a determination to keep the world of institutions and bureaucracies at arm's length as best he could, and to maintain the independence of his Sangha. During the first ten years or so of the monastery's existence, this policy included a rejection of allopathic medicine. His rationale was that monks had not had the advantage of Western medicine for 2500 years, and that what had been good enough for the great monks of old was good enough for the Sangha of Wat Pah Pong. To his way of thinking at the time, access to medical care provided by the state was one of the conveniences of lay life renounced on entering the monastic order. Running to the local hospital with every small complaint would undermine the key virtue of patience that the training aimed to cultivate. Over the course of time, Luang Por's compassion led him to moderate this particular principle, and he eventually discarded it. But for the early pioneers of Wat Pah Pong, it was a proud tradition.

This did not mean that physical ailments were left untreated altogether. In times of illness, the monks relied on herbal medicines made from local roots and leaves. Luang Por himself had gathered a wide knowledge of such traditional remedies during his years of wandering and knew treatments for most of the common ailments – digestive problems, joint pain, and haemorrhoids – that afflict monastics. In the early years at Wat Pah Pong, malaria was the greatest scourge, and virtually nobody was spared from it. For those afflicted, malarial fevers occur every one or

two days, usually commencing in the afternoon. They are characterized by a coldness that no number of blankets can relieve and accompanied by blinding headaches and nausea. If the parasites find their way to the brain, death may result. Fortunately, nobody died at Wat Pah Pong, but many, including Luang Por, came perilously close. Maechee Boonyu remembered one occasion vividly:

“Luang Por was the first one to fall ill with malaria, and he got it very badly. He had the monks carry him down from his kuti and lay him on a bamboo bed in the shade. We had no modern medicines. Luang Por wouldn’t let anyone have anything to do with the hospital; he wouldn’t even let anybody mention its name. So we just did our best to treat him with the herbs we had.

“When he got really bad, his skin took on a kind of greenish, discoloured hue. We knew that meant he’d reached the last stage of the illness. One day, the fever was particularly severe. After laying there for a moment, he’d pull himself up into a sitting posture; then, almost immediately, he would crumple back down again. This happened time and time again. Monks, novices, nuns and laypeople – we all sat there watching in silence. All our eyes were glued to him. He sat up again. He was swaying from side to side, trying to keep himself upright. He looked about and saw the dipper of medicine. He lifted it towards his mouth unsteadily, and before his attendant could help him, tipped it all over himself. He lay there drenched for a moment. Then you could see him make a great effort to gather himself. He put down the dipper, sat up straight one more time – and stayed that way. There was silence. He had entered samādhi. We were all frightened and amazed at what we saw.

“The next morning, he still hadn’t recovered, but from then on, over a period of many days, he started to gradually improve. I don’t know how it was he recovered but as soon as he did, then everyone else started to get ill. It was like an epidemic: monks, novices and nuns, everyone got it badly.”

Malaria rarely disappears completely. It often lies dormant in the liver. Luang Por was to suffer a number of relapses over the next three years. Ajahn Jun was one of the monks who tended to him during those times.

“At one time, he became seriously ill and we took turns nursing him. There would be two monks on each shift who would sit out on the veranda of his kuti and go inside every now and again to check how hot he was and see if he needed anything. But he would never let us massage him. He was concerned he’d become dependent on it. So we would sit out on the veranda and he would lie in the room shaking with fever. The attendants didn’t talk. We would sit meditating with our backs to each other. Whenever there was something to be done, we went inside.

“His fever would come on in the afternoons. I remember one day some people had come to see him and were waiting beneath the *mafai* tree, where we’d made a raised seat for him to sit on. Luang Por’s fever was very high right then: his head ached and he felt nauseous. But when we told him he had guests, he just got up, put on his robe and went down to welcome them as if nothing was the matter.

“The fever gave him bad constipation. Finally, one day he called me over, ‘Ajahn Jun, come and have a look at this.’ I walked over to where he was standing. He pointed to a leaf that he’d put down on the ground by the side of him and said, ‘That’s why I’ve been so constipated.’ I looked down. In the middle of the leaf was something that looked like a small rock. It was a lump of his excrement.”

The medicine used for malaria was prepared from borapet. The making of borapet infusions became one of the daily duties of the nuns. Maechee Boonyu recounts the method:

“You’d finely chop the vine – a foot-long section for each person – pound it to a mush and then strain it through a thin cloth into a glass of water. That would give you a thick liquid. Then you’d have to hold your breath and knock it back.”

Luang Por’s attitude to illness was uncompromising:

The monks in those days knew how to endure. No matter how ill they were, they would refuse to go to the hospital. I myself had malaria for three years and never went to the hospital once, I just struggled with it here. How did I treat it? I boiled borapet

and drank it with salt or with *samor*<sup>\*</sup>. It worked really well; it just wasn't very pleasant, that's all. It was difficult on the body, but if you haven't reached your time, you won't die. There was no medicine in those days. If anyone got malaria, I'd encourage them, 'Endure it. Meditation monks must be fearless. If any of you die, I'll see to the funeral myself. If I die first, then all of you can cremate me. Don't hold on, it's suffering.' That's how we'd talk and admonish each other. There was no discouragement or despair. The monks were really brave, courageous, capable. I had no concerns that any of them would be cowed by such things.

As Ajahn Jun remembered it, Luang Por's treatment of sick monks was gentler than his rhetoric:

"Luang Por was very tough. He used to say, 'If you're not dead, then make it good; and if it's no good, then let it die.' Even so, whenever one of the monks or novices became ill, he would always give them special attention and be particularly kind to them. If someone was too ill to come out for the meal, he would put food aside for them himself. He would go and visit them regularly at their kuti and ask how they were. If their spittoon was full, he'd take it away and wash it out. After that, he would sweep around the kuti and then inspire them with Dhamma teachings. We didn't have much in the way of medicine – only local herbs – but he gave the best that he could: encouragement in the practice."

## II. GOLDEN DAYS

### WARRIOR SPIRIT

The Luang Por Chah that left such an indelible impression on those who met him during his trips to the West in the mid-1970s is for many, the Luang Por Chah. Most of the surviving recorded talks, the well-known photographs, and the priceless seconds of footage in the BBC documentaries, were all from that period of his life. It is a wise, chuckling grandfather figure with a potbelly and walking stick that has embedded itself in the

<sup>\*</sup>The *samor* (chelubic myrobalan) is an astringent fruit allowed by the Vinaya to be eaten at any time of the day as a laxative.

Western Buddhist pantheon. People who met him at that time recall a warmth and wisdom emanating from him that seemed timeless – so much so that it was hard for anyone to imagine that he could ever have been any other way. But, of course, he had. Looking back twenty years, a somewhat different Luang Por Chah emerges. At that time in his life, although he appears a powerful and impressive figure, he is also, perhaps, a less engaging one. If, in his later years, he might have been compared to an absolute monarch at ease in a peaceful kingdom, then in the 1950s, the comparison that would have come to mind was that of the warrior king of a troubled land.

In the memories of those who lived with him in the early days of Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por was a spare, stern, vigorous figure. The few photos of him from this period convey an intimidating intensity. The images speak of a honed and disciplined mind focused unwaveringly on its goal. It was a period in which he felt the culmination of his practice to lie within his grasp. Seeing the kind of momentum and intensity of effort needed to break through the last wall of ignorance, he was in no mood for compromise. He pushed his disciples to their limits. Those who could endure it, stayed; those who could not, left. He would say to them that if they genuinely aimed for liberation, they should know that Nibbāna lay on the shores of death.

The intensity of the schedule that Luang Por maintained at Wat Pah Pong during the first period of its existence was the natural outcome of the prodigious efforts he was putting forth in his own practice. As he led a small, tightly knit community, with few of the teenage novices and elderly men that were to swell – and somewhat dilute the intensity of – the Sangha in later days, he did his best to carry his disciples along in his wake.

Patient endurance, lauded by the Buddha as ‘the most excellent incinerator of defilements’ was the virtue that featured most prominently in Luang Por’s exhortations to the Sangha. It was also the most striking feature of his own practice. The respect and awe in which the young monks held their teacher was inspired not only by the peace, wisdom and compassion that they recognized in him, but perhaps above all, by the fact that he seemed so much tougher than everyone else.

Over the centuries, it has been common throughout the world, for men at least, to look on spiritual endeavour as akin to warfare. In theistic traditions, the enemy that must be overcome is conceived of as an evil being; in Buddhism, it is the mental defilements. The idea of the spiritual warrior is one that has always appealed to young men, and in the early years of Wat Pah Pong, it was the dominant metaphor.

Luang Por, at this early stage of his teaching career, had much of the battlefield general about him. He appears as a rugged figure, always leading from the front, hard but fair to his disciples, and a master tactician. He portrayed spiritual life to his disciples as a long campaign requiring endurance, guile and supreme self-discipline. He urged them to grit their teeth and stick to their guns because the rewards of victory were great. His Dhamma talks often featured forceful martial and boxing imagery. The monks were urged to fight the good fight and kill greed, hatred and delusion; or at least to get up in the ring and beat them to pulp. It was good, stirring stuff and expertly pitched to the needs of his young audience.

The members of the Sangha at Wat Pah Pong had all grown up in the midst of a hierarchical and authoritarian society. They felt comfortable about deferring to elders. They responded well to clarity and bluntness. To a twenty-first century eye, Luang Por's style of leadership at this time of his life can seem harsh and autocratic, but seen in the context of the times and the prevailing culture, it was by no means unusual. He was a strict disciplinarian, scolding the monks for their failings with a sometimes startling ferocity. But nobody questioned that he had the right to speak to them in such a way. Indeed, for most young monks, having a teacher who struck fear into their hearts was inspiring. It was how it should be, how it was meant to be.

The training at Wat Pah Pong was characterized by a very precise attention to the extensive list of observances and regulations that augmented the main body of the Vinaya. Another military analogy may best describe the rationale for this approach: in the monastery, where life is understood as a 'state of emergency', care over the smallest of details can make the same difference between life and death as it can in wartime. Sharpness and clarity of mind were to be enhanced by grounding awareness in

the concrete realities of the monks' daily life. Today, that early period has attained the status of 'the good old days', a golden age from which subsequent generations have fallen. Monks who later confessed how afraid they felt of Luang Por then, did so with a pride that they were there, and a nostalgic smile.

Initially, Luang Por led the monks in the ruthless head-on style that worked so well for himself. As he got older his style mellowed. Whether the later period is viewed as an evolution or a decline (as will be seen, there were monks who held to both views), there is no doubt that, throughout his life, Luang Por would look back to the early days of the monastery as a time when the cohesion, dedication and faith of the Sangha were at a level never to be surpassed.

In those days, Ajahn Jun and Ajahn Tiang still didn't understand the practice – but they endured. They did as they were told, obedient to their teacher's instructions. Whatever I taught them or told them to do, they accepted it without argument, willing to listen to my words and reflect on them. That's why one of them was here for six years and the other for seven. During that period Ajahn Jun and Ajahn Tiang never left the monastery; never went off tripping around the country aimlessly, wasting their time on things of little value. They sought the Dhamma from the teacher and practised all the things that led to progress. That gave them great energy, both physical and mental. I led them in the practice, taught them to act courageously, to fear nothing at all. And they followed me.

#### ONE DAY AT A TIME

Ajahn Jun has spoken in detail of the daily life in Wat Pah Pong in those days:

"The bell would be rung at three o'clock for the morning chanting and meditation session. Luang Por would usually be in the Dhamma Hall first. We would all arrive at about the same time, and sometimes there would be a check to see if everyone was there. If anyone was slacking in their practice and not coming out, he would ask where they were. You had

fifteen minutes to get to the Dhamma Hall from the time the bell was rung and if you didn't make it, something would be said. There would be a period of sitting meditation first, followed by chanting. Sometimes during the sittings, Luang Por would give basic instructions on how to overcome the hindrances. We all tried hard and he kept an eye on everyone. If anyone was nodding, he would call out to wake them up.

"At the end of the session, Luang Por would remind us once more about our conduct and urge us to be constantly aware. When he spoke, everyone was completely silent. We respected him; we were in awe of him; nobody dared to fidget or speak. If anyone had to speak while they prepared their bowl and robes for alms-round, they whispered. The longer routes would leave first. Luang Por himself went on a short route. He never went to Bahn Kor; he said the virus was still inside him. He meant that he still felt a trace of attachment to his old village and the people in it. If he went every day and saw the old place where he used to live – his brothers and sisters, his nephews and nieces – it might bring up old attachments. So, unless it was unavoidable, he wouldn't ever go to Bahn Kor; he'd go on alms-round to Bahn Klang. During the time before alms-round, after the monks on the long routes had left, he would pick up a broom and do some sweeping or, on some days, remove the leaves from the shallow ditches along the side of the paths.

"At three o'clock in the afternoon, the bell would ring again. Before leaving your kuti, you'd close the door and windows, and take in your robes or any cloth that was out on the line so that if it rained you wouldn't have to run back. Then you'd bow. You always bowed. If you suddenly realized half-way down the path that you'd forgotten to bow, then you had to go back.

"You'd be carrying a broom and a water kettle in your hands, with your bathing cloth folded and tucked under your arm or on your head. When you got to the Dhamma Hall, you'd put your things down and go and bow to the statue of the Buddha inside. You'd put your kettle on the monks' seat and then go out. If the sun was strong you'd put the folded bathing cloth neatly on your head and then help sweep leaves. Luang Por would be there and we would sweep in a big line across the cleared area

of the forest. There was no conversation. If it wasn't absolutely necessary, nobody spoke. All that you could hear would be the sound of the brooms.

"In those days, there was rarely anything sweet to drink in the afternoons. All we'd get would be a bitter infusion made from borapet vine, samor and Indian gooseberry (makham pom)<sup>\*</sup>. There may not have been much sugar but there were plenty of samor – we'd eat them pickled or dipped in dried ground chillies and salt<sup>\*\*</sup>. But it wasn't every day. If there were some, Luang Por would have the afternoon bell rung early and we'd meet under the big mango tree at half-past two, before chores. Anyone who tossed the seeds away in a careless fashion would be in trouble. He'd say, 'You've soiled your virtue.' We weren't to throw the seeds away just anywhere, we had to put them all together in a neat pile and then afterwards one of us would dispose of them in the proper place. After we'd finished, Luang Por would say a few words of Dhamma, and then at three o'clock we'd go to work.

"Once the sweeping was over, we'd prepare water for drinking and general use. In the early days, we'd haul the water from the well and then carry it to the places it was needed in old kerosene cans. These cans would be carried suspended from a bamboo pole with a monk at each end, taking the weight on a shoulder. Luang Por would be one of the ones pulling on the rope and I would be the one who would lift out the bucket full of water and fill the tin cans. In those days, there weren't many monks – six, eight, ten – the numbers steadily increased. Everybody would help with the water hauling, young and old, and it was done in silence. Luang Por would be observing us the whole time. The monks were careful, respectful. We had a deep faith in what we were doing.

"When water hauling was over, then we'd sweep the Dhamma Hall, wipe down the floor and window frames, and lay down mats for the evening session. After that, we'd take a bath and then go out onto our walking paths to practice some walking meditation. As soon as the bell was rung at six o'clock, we'd pick up our robes and shoulder bag from the kuti, close the windows, bow, and set off for the evening session at a brisk pace.

<sup>\*</sup>The Indian gooseberry (emblic myrobalan) is another laxative member of the myrobalan family allowed by the Vinaya to be eaten at any time of the day.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Chillies, salt and garlic may also be consumed after noon for medicinal purposes.

Luang Por was always reminding us to get to the Dhamma Hall promptly and not to keep the senior monks waiting.

“After the evening sitting, there would be a period of chanting and then Luang Por would get up onto the Dhamma seat. Most days, he would read a passage from the *Pubbasikkhā* and then expand upon its meaning. It would usually be around ten or eleven o’clock before we’d pay respects to the Triple Gem and return to our kutis. Sometimes, it would be midnight or one in the morning.

“Luang Por was very frugal with the requisites. If he saw that someone had thrown something away in the forest – an old plastic dipper, say, or a spittoon that was still useable or whatever – he’d retrieve it. He’d say we were wasteful. ‘You’ve soiled your virtue.’ That was one of his favourite phrases, ‘You’ve soiled your virtue.’ When I first went to live at Wat Pah Pong, I couldn’t understand how you could soil your virtue so quickly or so easily. What he meant was that you’d said or done something inappropriate. You’d say something wrong, do something wrong, put things away poorly, lose your awareness, be in a daydream – and that would be soiling your virtue. He tried to have us use requisites frugally so that we wouldn’t run out of things. Some people didn’t understand. They said Luang Por was always complaining, that he nagged, that he was stingy. But it was really just that he had a standard that he was trying to maintain.

“Every Observance Day we’d keep the sitter’s practice – monks and laity. Everybody would refrain from sleeping for the whole night. It was very difficult to leave the hall. You’d be sitting there in agony but nobody would have the courage to be the first to go outside because it would mean showing yourself up in front of the others – and you’d worry about that. But once one had gone out others would follow. It wasn’t that people wanted to lie down and rest: they wanted to stretch their legs and do some walking meditation. Some nights, though, if you couldn’t bear it, you might actually lay down for a few minutes on the forest floor. But if you heard the sound of someone coming or of leaves crackling you’d jump up, afraid someone would see. Luang Por would say, ‘Going outside is for changing your posture. Don’t get into conversations.’ He himself just sat there motionless for the whole night.

“Sometimes Luang Por would have one of the laypeople give a Dhamma talk. There were two laymen who could give talks: Por Dee and Por Moon. Those two could talk all day and all night if you gave them the chance. Luang Por would say, ‘All right, now the monks and novices can hear a talk about lay life and how hard and full of troubles it is.’ Then one of the two would tell us all about the sufferings of life in the world. And, actually, we learned a lot.”

#### ABSOLUTE SINCERITY

In later years, Ajahn Tiang was sometimes teased for exaggerating the purity of the practice in the early days. Some monks said he projected too much of the fierceness and lack of humour in his own personality on to Luang Por. Nevertheless, his account of that early period is a powerful one.

“The heart of what Luang Por was teaching, the two things he was emphasizing above all else, were the Vinaya and meditation practice. The monastic regimen was not to be discarded or interrupted under any circumstances. If it wasn’t absolutely necessary, then there were no breaks from group practice. If there was a break, it never lasted more than fifteen days or, at most, a month. He laid great emphasis on meditation practice. You were told to practice walking and sitting meditation, keep putting forth effort – morning, noon and night. If you had some task to perform, you were to see to it and then return to your meditation. The monks weren’t interested in chatting or playing around. Everyone kept to themselves and did their practice. The laypeople who went to the monastery did the same. They listened to talks and learned about the Dhamma. They took meditation practice seriously and applied themselves to it at the appropriate times.

“Luang Por never spoke playfully. He never told jokes or acted in a high-spirited way. He never spoke of worldly things or led the monks into bad habits with talk of the sensual world. On the contrary, he would forbid such talk. He told the monks not to socialize. He said it led to cliques and disharmony. His sights were set firmly on practice. He was intent on the threefold training, and the study of the Dhamma and Vinaya.

“In those days, he would give regular instruction based on the *Pubbasikkha*. Every day, after evening chanting, we’d listen to the Vinaya. All our ways of doing things were in accordance with the Vinaya, right down to the details of the annual robe-offering ceremony (*kathina*). We trained ourselves to cut and sew our own robes, and to make toothwoods. We incorporated those things into our daily schedule and used them to overcome sloth, torpor and laziness. That was the way he taught: if you feel sleepy, then don’t sleep. Find some skilful means to get through your drowsiness. In the middle of the day if nothing else works, you can always make toothwoods.

“Sometimes, we’d practise until eleven or twelve at night before he’d let us go back. That would give you two hours of rest. How could you go to sleep for two hours? You just ended up sitting propped up against a wall or a tree somewhere near the Dhamma Hall. You’d never be in time to ring the bell: Luang Por would always be there first. We tried our best but who could make do with as little sleep as him? ...

“You had to do what you were told. If it was a walking period, you had to walk – no question. If it was a sitting period, you had to sit; you weren’t to get up. He wasn’t joking; it wasn’t in him. You had no alternative. If he saw you being stubborn, he would call you over and scold you. He scolded the monks; he scolded the novices. He’d even call a meeting to do it ... You couldn’t sit around relaxing anywhere, even for the blink of an eye. You couldn’t drift in and out of the Dhamma Hall: he’d ask straightaway, ‘What did you go outside for?’ If you’d gone out to urinate and disappeared for an hour then that would be it. ‘An hour to urinate? Next time you go, let me know. I’d like to see that for myself.’

“How could you fail to be afraid? You couldn’t skip anything. He didn’t joke, and he didn’t let anything go. If you didn’t have a proper walking path or the central area was left unswept, then that was it, you’d hear about it that very day: ‘Why not? Are you unwell? If you’re not feeling well, then why didn’t you come and tell me, or if you couldn’t do that, why didn’t you tell someone else? How can you just follow your own mind like that? You’re a member of a community, aren’t you? Or do you think you’re living alone?’

“He’d pull you up on everything. You couldn’t move an inch. You couldn’t wander about. Once the session was over and you could carry on practising on your own, even still, if he saw someone walking about then that was it, ‘Venerable Sir! Venerable Sir! What are you playing around at now?’ He had really sharp eyes. He didn’t let anything go, even very minor matters. If he told everyone to walk and you didn’t, then it would be a big deal. If the session was over, you had to go straight back to your kuti. If he hadn’t given permission, then you couldn’t go anywhere. If there was anything the matter, then you had to mention it. So there were some great stories in those days. It wasn’t so much that he forced anybody, but he had an absolute sincerity. That’s the way he ran the monastery in those days; but to be frank, we weren’t quite up to it.”

## COCONUT

Ajahn Tiang summarized Luang Por’s teachings:

“The first thing he told us to do was to establish a stable mindfulness: to make it continuous, not to get lost or distracted or let it be cut off. He said his Dhamma had no top and no bottom, it wasn’t short or long. He said that he had pressed it into a ball that was shaped like a coconut.

“He taught us to establish mindfulness, nurture our faith, incline our minds towards the Triple Gem of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. He himself had genuine reverence, and he taught that reverence to us too. He taught us to be mindful while we were bowing. He said if we let our minds wander and our mindfulness was poor, then there would inevitably be some fault or other in what we did. He would say that when your mind is not calm, when it’s in a hot, agitated, abnormal state, something will always go wrong.

“Mindfulness was his main emphasis: making mindfulness constant and smooth, without interruptions – not allowing it to be broken. Whether standing, walking, sitting, lying down or eating you had to be mindful, because if you lose your mindfulness it’s the same as losing your life – that’s what he’d say. If there was a work project going on for instance and we complained that we didn’t have the opportunity to practise, he would ask us if our breath stopped while we were eating or lying down.

How could you be too exhausted to meditate when your breath is so immediate and ordinary? There's nothing more to it than the breath. If you practise and you're mindful, it's nothing more than being with this ordinary breath. That was all he taught. Mindfulness was the main part of it.

"If you lose your mindfulness, what kind of meditation technique are you going to use? What sort of concentration are you going to develop? What purification is going to take place? You won't know how to achieve any of those things. It's mindfulness that is important. Coolness and tranquillity arise in the presence of mindfulness. Internal and external well-being come with mindfulness. Dhamma, Vinaya, every one of the monastic regulations depends on mindfulness. Without mindfulness, what are you going to make your object of awareness? That's how he taught the fundamental principles.

"He'd say, 'Don't get puffed up about being monks and novices; don't look down on others; don't be attached to your family background or nationality – that's not virtuous, and it's not the Dhamma. Wash your hands of that kind of pride. Aim at abandoning all conceit and views.' He told us not to make too much out of each other's faults, to keep considering how similar we all are, and not to dwell on thoughts of who's right and who's wrong. Admonishments are normal; after you've done something wrong, then put it behind you: don't hold on to feelings of right and wrong. As soon as there's holding on and attachment, it's not Dhamma and it's not Vinaya ...

"If something is in line with the Vinaya, then it is in line with the Dhamma as well: by keeping the Vinaya you are practising Dhamma. Luang Por treated them as interconnected; he never separated Dhamma from Vinaya ... He taught us to practice the different aspects of the path simultaneously. That's why he said his teachings weren't short or long but were pressed into a sphere, like a grapefruit or a coconut."

#### NO REPRIEVE

Monks who arrived in the mid-1960s, as the size of the community steadily increased, might have found a slight relaxation of Luang Por's intensity,

but by no means did they have an easy time of it. He still sought to create within his disciples the enthusiasm for the training and the patient endurance that was needed for them to succeed in it. His aim was still to foster within them a whole new attitude to their lives: an attitude in which ‘everything matters’. Nothing was to be done in a slipshod manner. Care, attention and respect had to be given to every action. Luang Por tirelessly admonished the monks when they were heedless. He drummed into them how essential it was to sustain mindfulness in every activity. With laxness or negligence in minor matters of procedure bringing down such wrath upon their heads, few monks could even contemplate larger, more serious transgressions. In most cases, a sense of wise shame and fear of consequences, although artificially quickened, soon matured. As Ajahn Anek remembered it:

“If anyone did something that deviated from his instructions, it would become an issue immediately ... Suppose Luang Por heard the sound of buckets clanking at the well outside of the time he’d laid down for hauling water, or of someone chopping jackfruit chips to make dye at the wrong time – that evening we would hear about it. He would get up on the Dhamma seat and lay down the law until late at night. On some occasions, he would keep going until three in the morning. By that time, it wasn’t worth going back to our kutis, and after he’d got down from the seat, we would launch straight into the morning chanting.

“So we would have to keep nudging and reminding each other if we saw anyone doing anything at the wrong time, because we were afraid of another dressing-down. Even if there was only one miscreant, Luang Por wouldn’t let anyone else go back to their kutis. Everyone had to sit there and listen to the admonishment; it was no different than if you yourself were being told off. And it was frustrating for those who wanted to meditate or had other business to see to.

“We monks were really afraid – afraid that we’d have to listen to a long talk. If Luang Por knew someone had done something wrong, then he would never leave it overnight. He’d either call over the individual monk at fault, or speak to the whole Sangha. He was always very strict and vigorous. Anyone who had any kind of business, no matter how important or trivial, would have to go and ask his permission first before seeing to

it. You couldn't just go ahead and do something on your own authority. If you did, you could be sure that that evening you'd be in for a long talk.

"If anyone missed chanting or came five or ten minutes late, it was a serious matter. As you approached the Dhamma Hall you had to walk as softly and silently as possible. Making a noise was completely unacceptable. If you did, you'd be admonished for disturbing the people already meditating in the hall. Luang Por said that making a noise close to people who were meditating was ill-mannered and bad *kamma*; what's more, it indicated a lack of mindfulness, self-awareness and sense-restraint. He said that for a practitioner of Dhamma, it was disgraceful behaviour."

Ajahn Reuangrit recalled:

"If you went out to urinate, you'd be admonished; you had to endure until the end of the session. He'd say, 'Other people can do it, why can't you? You're a human being the same as they are, you've got all the same organs. What's so difficult?' That's how we did things in those days. Your robe would become completely soaked with sweat, and you'd lose so much fluid that way that the ache to urinate would disappear. We were also afraid of Luang Por, really afraid, when he started getting onto us like that, 'You eat a lot and sleep a lot. If you eat a lot, then you have to shit a lot; drink a lot and you have to piss a lot.' I've heard those words so many times! But as a result, in our eating, in our actions, we were always very moderate. In those days, there was a great care and precision in how we did things."

## RELAXATION

The atmosphere at Wat Pah Pong was not, however, as grim and harsh as some of the preceding passages might suggest. Luang Por's exhortations were given in a semi-tropical forest in which, for months every year, stifling heat and humidity encourage sloth and torpor. His audience was an easy-going group of young men, raised in a culture that did not instil the crippling sense of guilt or self-aversion that might have led them to take such brow-beating unwisely. The heavy hand was, in short, a medicine whose benefits outweighed its side-effects.

After some time, monks became accustomed to the novelties of the monastic life. If their meditation practice was yet to bear much fruit, it was

difficult for them to maintain their original enthusiasm. The constant urging and upbraiding from Luang Por sought to invigorate the regular cases of slumping zeal. His words were, in some ways, the equivalent of a Zen master's stick. Not everyone could endure it, and some monks left. But for the most part, they enjoyed the fiery talks in the same way that they relished fiercely spiced food; common praise for a more abrasive talk was that it 'really got down to the chillies and ginger'.

But there were also times when the Sangha came (as close as bald-headed monks could come) to letting their hair down. Every now and again, Luang Por would invite everyone over to his kuti in the evening. Cigarettes would be passed around and the monks would sit in the lamp light, outer robes removed, smoking and listening to Luang Por's anecdotes and stories. He would talk about the wisdom of enlightened monks, the hard-earned triumphs and comical failures of unenlightened disciples, encounters with wild animals and ghosts, tales from the time of the Buddha. Monks would laugh a lot, there would be questions and the sharing of experiences. These occasions were treasured by the monks. The warmth, companionship and emotional support they felt as they sat there answered needs not met in the formal gatherings of the community.

On these occasions, Luang Por effected an apparently effortless switch from commander-in-chief to father figure. The ambiguity of the monks' feelings towards Luang Por became obvious on these occasions. At the same time as fearing him almost as mice do the cat, or (in his own simile) as burglars do the policeman, they loved and trusted him completely, and would savour every moment of their time in his presence. The monks sometimes felt that the points of Dhamma that they gleaned from these occasions went deeper into their hearts than the teachings they received during formal Dhamma talks. They would return to their kutis after these sessions, charged and refreshed, eager to meditate.

#### WATER RIGHTS

Not everyone was happy that there were monks in Pong Forest. There were local prejudices and misunderstandings to overcome. One of the first points of contention with the villagers was the sensitive issue of water use.

We dug a really good well in the forest. We put up a sign in front of it saying, ‘For monks only. Not to be used by laypeople’, and filled a separate earthenware jar with water for anybody coming through the forest. We got criticized for that. Por Nupee was the worst: as soon as he heard the village women saying that the monks wouldn’t let the laypeople drink their water – that was it! He was hopping mad, ‘What! Who do those monks think they are? Why won’t they let laypeople drink their water? They go to all the trouble of becoming monks and learning about the Buddha’s teachings, and they end up so selfish they won’t even share their water. You’d think they weren’t dependent on the laypeople for their food every day.’

There! All because of a misunderstanding. In my own village as well. In fact, they were welcome to drink the water. It was just that, when the villagers haul water themselves, they use buckets that they’ve been storing frogs and fish or tadpoles or whatnot in, which make the water dirty. I didn’t want them to do that, and so when we hauled water every day, we put some in a jar specially for laypeople. But people didn’t tell the whole story: they just said that we wouldn’t let them use our water. So when Por Nupee heard just that, he was so angry that he stormed out of the village. He said he was going to drive the monks out of the forest. ‘What sort of monks are these? Who do they think they are? Have they forgotten that we’re the ones that feed them?’ He’d only heard half the story. It took a long time to explain to him, but then when he understood he became a disciple and, later on, the monastery’s head layman.

Villagers, some of whom had formerly cut timber illegally, hunted and raised cattle etc. on the edge of the forest were now unable to do so. They were angry at the disruption of their livelihood. Some of the disgruntled villagers came up with a plan to discredit the monks. Unwittingly repeating a ploy going back to the time of the Buddha himself, it involved compromising one of the monks with a woman. The monk who went on alms-round to that village was informed by a well-wisher of what was being considered. Worried, he informed Luang Por. Luang Por said that

he would go on alms-round to the village himself. Inevitably, monastery lay supporters objected:

“Ajahn, don’t go on your own. They say they’re going to get a young woman to hug you and then shout out that you tried to rape her.”

Luang Por unfazed, joked with them:

Bring her on. I’ve never been hugged by a young woman in my life. Let her try. It should be great!

In the end, the villagers lost their nerve (who knew what kammic retribution they would be calling down upon themselves, they worried; better safe than sorry). And from that point onwards, relations between the wat and the villagers slowly but steadily improved.

#### TO CATCH A THIEF

Another problem arose when it became known that the nuns had planted fruit trees. At the beginning, people would come in to ask for a few of the papayas, guavas, lemons or bananas; after a while, they came to steal. One of the nuns resident at that time remembers the skilful way Luang Por solved the problem:

“The thieves would usually sneak in at about eight or nine at night while the monks were attending the evening session. One day Luang Por told some postulants to cut some of the largest *korm* thorn bushes and conceal them by the side of the path used by the thieves. That night he had monks wait at three points along the path. He himself was at the first point close to where the thieves would steal the papayas. The second point lay half-way along the path, and the third was near to the thorn trap.

“At the expected time, the thieves came into view carrying bags and baskets. While they were engrossed in picking the papayas, Luang Por gave a signal and the thorn bushes were placed length-wise along the path. The bushes were big. Every branch was covered with sharp thorns and they covered the path completely.

“When Luang Por estimated that the thieves had almost filled their baskets, he coughed softly. The cough wasn’t loud enough to make them

panic and throw away their booty immediately, but it was enough for them to decide they needed to leave quickly. The thieves lifted the baskets to their shoulders and hurried off, half-walking, half-running. When they reached the second point Luang Por shouted out from behind them: ‘Did you see anyone go that way?’ ‘Where are they? Where are they?’, the monks hiding at the second point shouted back.

“Hearing these voices the thieves got really scared and started to run like crazy. When they reached the third point the monks hiding there made a commotion. Meanwhile, behind them, the monks from the first two points were chasing them down the path. The sound of shouts and whoops filled the forest. Now the thieves really panicked. They threw down the baskets and lengths of cloth wrapping the papayas and sprinted away – straight into the thorn bushes. The first thief suddenly felt the pain and pulled up sharply. The second one cannoned into him and the two of them crawled around trying desperately to free themselves from the thorn bushes. Their groans of pain were deafening. Anyway, they were so afraid that, finally, they managed to get free and ran off back to their village.

“Luang Por had the postulants gather up the evidence, the baskets and the *khaoma* cloths. He knew the identity of the thieves would be no secret, because they would be laid up in bed for two or three days before their children would be able to pull out all the thorns. After that time had passed he sent for the Village Headman.

“Luang Por said, ‘Tell them to come and collect their baskets and cloths. They dropped them in the forest. Tell them they don’t have to be afraid. Tell them to come and get them from me. They’ve left them here a long time already. If they don’t hurry the papayas will have dried up and they won’t be able to sell them.’

“One of the thieves came. Luang Por spoke to him kindly, without scolding, and taught him to carry on an honest livelihood and to give up thieving; the papayas weren’t worth the bad kamma. After that, the thefts ceased.”

## CATS AND DOGS

Abandoned dogs were another issue. It has long been a custom in Thailand to release unwanted dogs in village monasteries where the monks feed them from leftover alms-food. But when people started to do this in Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por had to explain why he could not agree to it:

We don't like cats and dogs here. We already have a lot of creatures – squirrels and shrews and jungle fowl in particular – and we're trying to conserve them for future generations. The dogs you let go in the forest kill these animals. Please don't do it again. Whoever brought these dogs here then take them away with you. If you don't want to take them, then I can get one of the monastery lay supporters to see to it. But don't bring dogs into the forest again. The squirrels, the shrews, the forest chickens – they belong to all of you as much as to me. When your children and grandchildren have grown up, they will be able to come and see these different kinds of creatures in the monastery. There's not many left of the ones living outside the monastery. We've all got to help to look after these creatures in the forest.

## TAKING ROOT

Initially, relations between Wat Pah Pong and the monks in the surrounding villages and the city of Ubon were strained. The tensions were familiar ones. Since the appearance of the Luang Pu Mun lineage some forty years before, friction between the forest monks and local Sanghas had occurred frequently. Urban scholars and administrators tended to look on forest monks with disdain. Their custom of giving Dhamma talks in the Isan language rather than Central Thai, and of employing a plain, unvarnished style rather than delivering text-based sermons in elevated language read from palm leaves, was considered disrespectful to the Dhamma. With some reason, scholars worried that the impromptu style of teaching, unsupported by frequent reference to Pali texts, easily led to uneducated opinion being passed off as the Buddha's teaching. The forest monks' practice of keeping to the ascetic practices, such as eating once a day from their bowls, was seen as excessive, out of date and uncouth.

The forest monks threatened the prestige of the urban monks. Although the forest tradition was largely unknown in Ubon, anyone who had read or heard stories from the scriptures could see that their way of life was much closer to the ancient ideal than was that of the urban monks. The local village monks often felt intimidated by the presence of monks strict in Vinaya. Formerly, there had been no standard to measure them by: their laxness was just the way things were, and people were used to it. But now things had changed. Laypeople who had been to Wat Pah Pong came back inspired and compared it favourably with their local monastery. Luang Por did not just accept their offerings and chant a few blessings in Pali, they said, he taught them the value of precepts and how to meditate. Jealousy of Luang Por sometimes found expression in scorn and abuse. Luang Por's reply was to quietly carry on with his practice and the training of monks, and to behave so impeccably as to deprive the snipers of their ammunition.

From very early on, the monastery established by Luang Por in Pong Forest was known as Wat Pah Pong. But it was not, in the technical or legal sense of the word, a 'wat' at all. 'Wat' is a designation conferred on a monastic residence by the Crown, on the advice of the ruling body of the national Sangha. It denotes a formal recognition of the monastery's legitimacy and orthodoxy from the powers-that-be. Application for this status is a natural and expected progression for monastic communities that are firmly established, have all essential buildings erected, and have a steady lay support. Wat Pah Pong would not become a 'wat' in the eyes of the law until 1970. In the early years of its existence, its insecure legal status made it worryingly vulnerable to hostile forces.

Luang Por was keenly aware that the long-term security of Wat Pah Pong was dependent on establishing a good relationship with the Sangha Elders in the city or, at least, one based upon mutual acceptance. While it was true that there was no danger that powerful figures would seek to interfere in the way that he ran Wat Pah Pong on a day-to-day basis, Luang Por and his monks were answerable by law to the administrative jurisdiction of senior monks appointed on the rural, district and provincial levels. If Wat Pah Pong became the subject of these monks' enmity or suspicion, it would be difficult for the monastery to survive. Monks branded as

'vagabonds' and 'renegades' had been known to be evicted from their hermitages or even forcibly disrobed. Accusations that forest monks were communists was becoming an increasingly effective slur.

Luang Por's solution was quiet diplomacy. To the monks in village monasteries surrounding him, he was unfailingly polite and often made donations to them of excess requisites or tools. Gradually, Wat Pah Pong became a recognized member of the local scene. By asking the head monk of the local district to be his disciples' preceptor, Luang Por gave this powerful figure a personal interest in the welfare of the Wat Pah Pong Sangha. He arranged textbooks for monks who wished to take the Nak Tam Dhamma exams, and the impressive exam results of the Wat Pah Pong monks earned them a grudging respect amongst the urban scholars.

Luang Por made a particular point of showing deference to the senior monks in the local town of Warin and the city of Ubon. He tried to let them see for themselves that he and his disciples were not revolutionaries bent on overthrowing a corrupt establishment; they were simple forest monks seeking a quiet place to practise. Once a year, at the start of the Rains Retreat, he would take his Sangha to pay respects to their superiors. Even if – as often occurred in the early years – he was spoken to sarcastically or patronized, Luang Por would maintain a bowed-head humility that disarmed his would-be antagonists.

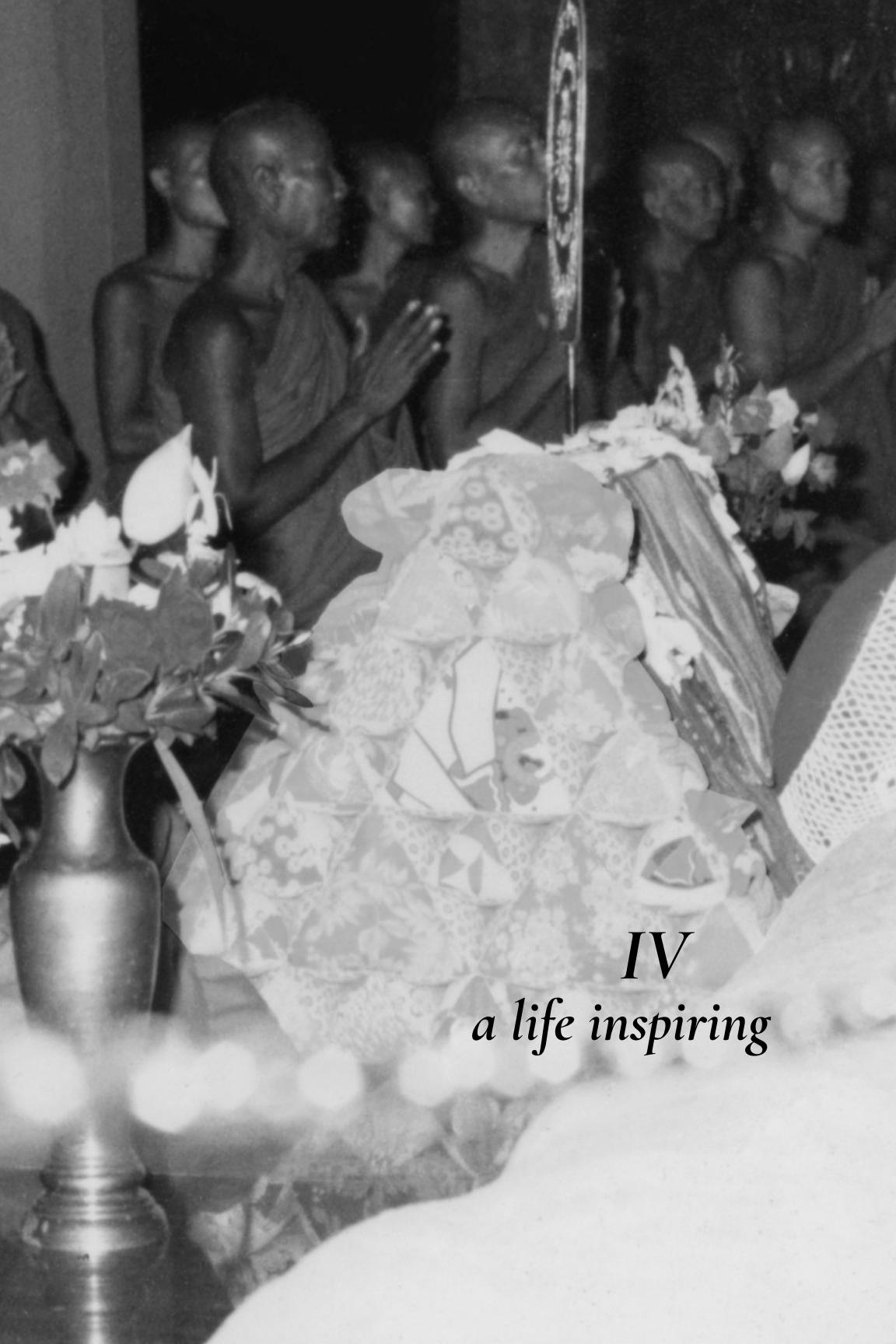
As the years went by, Luang Por's seniority and fame steadily increased. Burgeoning lay support, both local and national, provided a buffer against his detractors, and the wat became secure. At the same time, a number of locally prominent scholar monks such as Ajahn Maha Amorn became disciples, giving the Wat Pah Pong Sangha a certain intellectual legitimacy in the eyes of Pali scholars. Suspicion and distrust of Luang Por lessened considerably. Jealousies went underground. More and more monks asked to come to train at Wat Pah Pong.

Adverse reactions from village and urban monks were not a wholly bad thing. The perception that the Wat Pah Pong monks held of themselves as a beleaguered minority – the only strict and dedicated monks in a sea of corruption and decline – intensified their commitment and sense of community. It seems reasonable to assume that the harmony and

unity that became such a distinctive feature of Wat Pah Pong was, in part, built upon this early perception of the wat as a solitary island of authentic practice. It was true that, from time to time, the arrogance that usually accompanies feelings of being special could be seen to surface amongst members of the Wat Pah Pong Sangha. But with Luang Por constantly urging them to confront defilements head on, most monks were too painfully aware of their own failings to sustain serious feelings of superiority.

Ten years after Luang Por's return to Ubon, he could be happy with the results of his efforts at Wat Pah Pong. The growing number of monks, novices and nuns was an indication of a monastery in rude good health. Luang Por was learning more and more about how to teach and train his disciples. Almost a hundred years after the birth of its founder, Luang Pu Mun, in an outlying village, the forest monastic lineage was finally taking root in Ubon.





IV

*a life inspiring*

*People hold dear one who embodies virtue and insight, who is principled, who has realized the truth and who does what ought to be done.*

*Dhp 217*

# *A Life Inspiring*

*Luang Por the Good Friend*

## I. INTRODUCTION

From 1954 onwards, Luang Por Chah's life was focused on his monastery, training the steadily growing number of monks, novices and nuns who were resident there, and teaching its lay supporters. By the late 1970s, he had become one of the most revered monks in Thailand. After travelling to England in 1977, however, Luang Por's health started to decline. In early 1983, paralyzed and unable to express himself coherently, he stopped speaking. And in January 1992, after over nine years of stillness and silence, Luang Por's life came to an end.

The years when Luang Por was in his prime do not lend themselves to a chronological narrative, as there is relatively little external incident to relate. Monastic life is intentionally repetitive. Luang Por rarely travelled except to branch monasteries. As a celibate forest monk, his personal life was without drama: he did not marry, fathered no children, had no love affairs. He neither made a single penny nor lost one, and accumulated no more possessions than he would have been able to carry over his shoulder in a cloth bag. For twenty-five years, Luang Por's life – at least that which has left a record – is primarily the story of the teachings that he gave and the training that he developed.

It is during these years that Luang Por fully matured in his role as the ‘*kalyāṇamitta*’ or ‘good friend’\*, the Buddhist ideal of a spiritual teacher. Good friendship was not just half, the Buddha famously corrected Ven. Ānanda, but the whole of the Holy Life. In other words, the support of the *kalyāṇamitta* is fundamental to Buddhist training. The fruit of practice might be a liberation from all need for external supports, but on the path to that liberation, ‘good friends’ are indispensable.



The Buddha described the ideal *kalyāṇamitta* as one who inspires affection and devotion, respect and emulation in those around him. He is patient with the questions and foibles of his disciples and skilled in

\*‘*Kalyāṇa*’ means ‘noble’ or ‘admirable’; ‘*mitta*’ means ‘friend’.

communicating with them. The kalyāṇamitta is able to explain profound topics in terms that are clear and easily understood; he never abuses his power to lead disciples astray. The Buddha said that it is association with the kalyāṇamitta that leads to hearing and conversing about the Dhamma, to growth in morality, to diligence and skill in abandoning the unwholesome and developing the wholesome, and to clear discernment of the way things are. On the day of Luang Por’s cremation, the great scholar, Chao Khun Phra Debvedi (P.A. Payutto), was invited to give a discourse to the huge assembly of monastics and lay Buddhists gathered there. He chose to speak on the ways in which Luang Por Chah had been a true kalyāṇamitta to his disciples.

The following chapters of this book will examine in more detail the ways in which Luang Por fulfilled his role as a kalyāṇamitta. These will include chapters on exactly what and how he taught his monastic disciples – monks and maechees, Thais and Westerners – and how he taught his lay disciples. This present chapter, however, will focus on Luang Por himself: how he was seen by others, and in particular, on the qualities that enabled him to fulfil the role of the kalyāṇamitta.

In his references to the kalyāṇamitta, the Buddha showed that he recognized that the feelings and perceptions evoked in the student by the teacher can play a significant role in the learning process. From observing his conduct, the student forms beliefs about the kalyāṇamitta and develops trust and confidence in him. The willingness of students to make the sacrifices necessary for progress in Dhamma and the diligence and passion with which they study and practice, are not simply a function of their understanding of what is involved. They are rooted in their perception of the teacher, by the affection and respect they feel for him, and by the degree to which they take him as a role model. Students tend to receive the strongest boost in the presence of one who they believe has followed the path and is a witness to its fruits. Faith in the attainment of the teacher is a powerful support in the practice of Dhamma.

From the beginning of his teaching career, Luang Por demonstrated, to an unusual degree, a natural charisma that included leadership qualities and a gift for articulating the Dhamma. To Luang Por’s monastic disciples, his compassion for them, and his patience with their foibles, filled them with

devotion. The standard of his practice of the Vinaya, his obvious mastery of meditation practices and the wisdom with which he expounded the teachings filled them with respect. They wanted to follow in his footsteps. Central to their commitment to him and his training was a confidence in his liberation from defilements.

## II. IMPONDERABLES ANYWAY

### LIBERATION

*So this Holy Life, monks, does not have gain, honour and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of samādhi as its benefit, or knowledge and vision as its benefit. But it is this unshakeable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end.*

MN 29

What exactly is meant by the ‘unshakeable deliverance of mind’? The Buddha taught that four stages of inner liberation may be discerned. Once attained, they cannot be weakened or lost, and hence they may all be deemed ‘unshakeable’. In fact, the word ‘attainment’ here has to be used with some caution. The Buddha defined each stage of liberation in terms of the irrevocable abandonment of specific mental defilements: a ‘deliverance’ from them. The changes that take place at each stage are thus experienced primarily in terms of endings rather than gains. In the central Buddhist metaphor, embodied in the word ‘Buddha’ itself, the experience is referred to as ‘awakening’.

Those who have reached the final and highest stage of deliverance are called ‘arahants’; they have transcended even the subtlest expressions of greed, hatred and delusion. Their self-referring motivations are now entirely replaced by wisdom and compassion. All of the inner cravings and attachments that provide the fuel for rebirth are no more. It is believed by many Thai Buddhists, monastic and lay, that Luang Por Chah reached this highest stage.

Did Luang Por himself know or believe himself to be an arahant? There is evidence that he did, but it is surprisingly scanty. Perhaps the most important observation to be made on the topic is that Luang Por made a point of never speaking about it. On a rare occasion, he might refer to himself with the simple and down-to-earth phrase, ‘I have nothing’ – but, in general, Luang Por deflected all questions about his attainments.

His reticence over a matter of such huge significance to him was largely mandatory. The Vinaya restricts the extent to which a monk may speak about his own practice to *anupasampannā* – anyone not yet fully ordained. The importance of the restrictions may be gathered by the ruling that, irrespective of the audience, a monk who falsely claims spiritual attainments (unless through genuine over-estimation), must be immediately expelled from the Sangha.

At first glance, this may seem disproportionately severe given that the other three expulsion offences consist of murder and theft – universally acknowledged as grossly immoral – and sexual intercourse, a betrayal of a defining principle of monastic life. But with the promulgation of this training rule, the Buddha made it clear that he considered false boasts of spiritual prowess to have potentially disastrous long-term effects on Buddhist communities, every bit as – in fact, more – dire than individual acts of lust or hatred.

The Buddha’s concern about what might appear to be simply a special case of wrong speech was due to the threat that it bore to the relationship between ordained and lay Buddhists, a relationship on which the future of the Buddha *Sāsana* would depend. By claiming to be enlightened, monks would draw the interest, faith and support of lay Buddhists away from the Sangha as a whole and towards themselves as charismatic individuals. The harmony of the Sangha would be undermined. Personality cults could well develop in which laypeople were exploited. Then, if and when the falsehood was revealed, their faith in Buddhism would be lost. Meanwhile, modest and genuinely liberated monastics might be neglected and disregarded by lay supporters who assumed that, if they were truly enlightened, they would have already revealed it to the world. Lay Buddhists entertaining thoughts of disrespect towards liberated beings could be led to act or

speak in ways that created seriously bad kamma.\* The expulsion offence sought to prevent all of these consequences.

Even in cases where a monk revealed genuine spiritual attainments to lay Buddhists (usually with the intention of encouraging them in their practice), the danger to the ordained-lay Buddhist relationship was not avoided. For this reason, the Buddha also declared a lesser offence of *pācittiya* for true revelations of spiritual prowess.

Although Luang Por could have revealed his attainments to his fellow monks at Wat Pah Pong without transgressing a training rule, he did not. He would have been aware that any statements made to the Sangha would inevitably leak out to the lay community. The Sangha was not a fixed hermetic group; every year, monks gave up the training and disrobed. Indeed, the testimony of disrobed monks, together with the words of monks praising their teacher to lay supporters, have always been the most common source of rumours about monks' attainments which spread throughout the wider Buddhist community. Luang Por kept a noble silence.

#### HE IS WHAT HE IS

As he presumably intended, Luang Por's lead on this matter created a culture of discretion at Wat Pah Pong. Spiritual attainments were considered private matters. Speculation about the attainments of others or asking questions about them was considered uncouth, and if the person referred to was Luang Por himself, inappropriate. This standard of restraint did much to protect the system of seniority laid down in the Vinaya from being undermined by cliques forming around more junior, but charismatic monks.

There was one occasion, however, when the culture came close to cracking. It occurred when a quite junior visiting monk claimed openly to resident monks that he was an arahant. Some members of the Sangha believed the claim to be true, most were non-committal and a few were dismissive.

\*The results of bodily, verbal or mental kamma directed towards an enlightened being, whether wholesome or unwholesome, are understood to be far more intense than that directed at unenlightened beings.

The authenticity of the monk's enlightenment became a favourite topic of conversation, especially when it became known, intriguingly, that he spent a lot of the time lying down. The report of one dialogue swept through the wat. Apparently, on being asked what kind of meditation he practised while he was lying down, he had replied that while lying down, he didn't do anything at all. His questioner had then said that if he lay down without doing anything, he'd fall asleep. The monk replied, 'Ah yes, but falling asleep would be doing something.'

The visiting monk's influence spread. Finally, somebody screwed up the courage to ask Luang Por for a definitive answer as to whether the monk was indeed what he said he was. But Luang Por had seen all this before and was not willing to feed the kind of curiosity that lay behind the question. In a neutral voice, he replied:

If he is, he is; if he isn't, he isn't. Me, I'm not anything at all. There's nothing in me to be anything. Our affairs are our own, they're no business of anyone else. And others' business is nothing to do with us.

This was a characteristic response. Luang Por had little time for monks who liked to gossip about other monks' attainments.

Look instead at your own mind. Look at your intention. Why do you want to know? What good does it do you? What is the state of your mind right now? Is there still any greed there? Any aversion? Any delusion? How can you be free of them?

After a while, the visiting monk left, and the small buzz of excitement faded. Some time later, addressing the Sangha, Luang Por returned to a favourite theme. He taught that the right attitude to adopt towards the realization of Dhamma, whether one's own or that of others, arose through the recollection of uncertainty. No experience whatsoever, however sublime, was to be grasped at. He cautioned his disciples about the 'defilements of insight'<sup>\*</sup> in which identification with elevated states of mind developed through meditation led to erroneous beliefs in realization and a dangerous overestimation of one's achievements:

<sup>\*</sup>Vipassanupakkilesas. See Glossary, 826.

Their samādhi is good, but there's no vipassanā, and so they see only one side of things ... They mistake their faith for wisdom and are blind to their wrong thinking.

He reminded his disciples that levels of liberation were not new enlightened identities and counselled them:

Don't be anything at all. Being something, anything at all, is suffering ... Sneak into the presence of the Buddha. Where is the Buddha? Right there in the impermanence, the unreliability of things! Take hold of that to begin with. If your mind is saying, 'I'm a stream-enterer', bow to the Buddha, and he'll tell you 'Maybe, maybe not (*mai nae*).' You think, 'I'm a non-returner', and he'll say the same thing, 'Maybe, maybe not.' You think, 'I'm an arahant', and the Buddha will really give it to you, 'Maybe, maybe not!'

Luang Por's avoidance of the topic of his own experience was matched by his more general reticence on the topic of liberation itself. In this, he followed the Buddha himself, who typically focused on the obstacles to realization and the methods needed to deal with them, and left aspirants to discover for themselves what remained once those obstacles had been overcome. There was only so much about a reality beyond language that could be captured in words. Luang Por held that while teachings about that reality might be inspiring, they could become obstacles on the path. A fixed idea of liberation could easily lead to anticipation, craving and identification with subtle mental states that would hinder the liberation from them.

Towards the end of his teaching career, Luang Por was introduced to the teachings of the Zen tradition. He enjoyed the playful, paradoxical use of language he found there and seemed to appreciate a way to speak about experiences beyond conventions and rational thought. Every now and again, he would speak in a cryptic, poetic style of things about which he had hitherto been more reserved:

In the beginning, I've said it's a matter of, 'Go quickly, come back quickly, stop quickly.' If you keep on doing this, eventually there won't be anything much: things merely what they are.

Everything will have come to an end. No need to walk, no need to retreat, no need to stop. No going, coming or stopping. It's all over! Take this away and reflect on it until it's clear in your mind. At that point, there's really nothing at all.

## SPECULATION

Despite Luang Por's unwillingness to speak about the results of his practice, there would, nevertheless, seem to be a place in a book such as this one to address some common questions on the matter. For this reason, the following paragraphs will be devoted to the task. Although this section would like to have earned the title of 'Reflections', it has had to settle for the much less weighty, 'Speculations'.

There can never be any cast-iron proof of the presence of spiritual maturity, only of its absence. But there are certain principles that may be relied upon when looking into the matter. The most important one lies in examining the Buddha's statements about the characteristics of the liberated being and then observing whether or not, over a long period of time, a person's actions and speech are consonant with those qualities. Also to be taken into account are whether the person believes himself to be liberated, and thirdly, whether other liberated beings confirm that he is.

In the case of Luang Por, there is much evidence that his actions and speech did correspond to those of a liberated being as revealed in the Buddha's discourses. Although he did not proclaim his liberation, it seems reasonable to assume from certain words by which he is known to have referred to himself, such as 'finished' and 'nothing left' for example, that he felt assured of it. He was also recognized as liberated by the greatest of his contemporaries in the Thai Forest Tradition. Luang Ta Maha Bua, the acknowledged leader of the tradition, was forthright on the point more than once, declaring, for example, that, 'Luang Por Chah is a diamond of the first water.' While none of these points is a proof, each one has provided grounds for Buddhist practitioners to establish a reasoned faith in Luang Por as a 'Noble One'.

But if Luang Por's liberation is taken as a working hypothesis, a further query begs to be answered: where and when did the significant break-

throughs in his practice occur? The only way to answer this question with any confidence would, of course, be through Luang Por's own testimony. But, as has been mentioned above, he was silent on the matter. All that remains is conjecture. As a preface to the following remarks, it must be emphasized that there is no consensus on the matter amongst Luang Por's disciples – in fact, it is rarely discussed – and no firm conclusions should be drawn from the points that are made.

The first speculation is that Luang Por had realized at least the first of the four levels of liberation – stream-entry – before establishing Wat Pah Pong in 1954. The reasoning behind this assertion is that Luang Por was strongly influenced by teachings of Luang Pu Mun and of the Buddha himself, cautioning monks from teaching before they were truly ready to do so. A Dhammapada verse, for example, states:

*One should first establish oneself in what is proper, then only should one instruct others. Such a wise person is not liable to be reproached. As he instructs others, so should he act himself.*

*Dhp 158-9*

The Buddha taught that unenlightened beings are severely restricted in the degree to which they may offer spiritual sustenance to others. On one occasion, he compared it to a person mired in a cesspit trying to pull another person free. Only when the compassionate person is on firm footing himself can he truly help anyone else.

Luang Pu Mun would sometimes speak of the bad kamma that can be created by one still prey to defilements who teaches others. Amongst his disciples, the most common interpretation of this warning was that only stream-entry provides a monk with the unshakeable Right View that will guard against him leading students astray. In practice, this did not mean that Luang Pu Mun forbade unenlightened monks from all kinds of teaching. Indeed, he encouraged his monks to give Dhamma talks to the villagers they met with on their tudong wanderings. It was the establishment of a monastery, and the formalization of the teaching role, that seems to have been the step too far.

The idea of a monk completing the final three stages of his own practice while fulfilling the role of a teacher was, however, sanctioned by the

Buddha. He compared such a monk to the leader of a herd of animals, who is able to take care of his herd without neglecting his own need for grazing. Taking these points into consideration, the fact that Luang Por started to take on disciples from around 1952, and in 1954 agreed to establish a monastery, is significant. They would appear to be clear indications that, by that time, he considered himself to be standing on firm ground.

To proceed further along this path of speculation, it may be deduced that as his visit to Langka Mountain was for the purpose of gaining advice on a problem in his meditation, it must have preceded stream-entry. His experience underneath the wooden Dhamma Hall\* as he descended the mountain is one of the best candidates for the key breakthrough. The gap between that day and the period when he first accepted monks as his students is around three years. This corresponds to a private comment later attributed to him that he carefully monitored his mind for three years before being absolutely sure that his breakthrough was genuine. Further circumstantial evidence is provided by his declaration that by practising with real diligence, five years is sufficient to realize stream-entry.

One point generally agreed upon is that when Luang Por established Wat Pah Pong, he still had work to do. This may well help to explain the rigour of the training that he developed in the first years of the monastery (and somewhat relaxed in later years). There are few clues as to when he made the remaining breakthrough(s)\*\*, although one episode is suggestive. It is said that, one day, Luang Por lost his temper with an inattentive novice. The awareness that the capacity to lose his temper still dwelt within him was such a shock to Luang Por that he went into his kuti vowing not to leave it again until he had victory over this remnant of defilement. Ten days later he emerged.

To repeat once more, the preceding passages are speculative. For his disciples, the sense that their teacher was impeccable in Vinaya and absolutely trustworthy in the Dhamma was more important than estimations of his attainment. What they could know for themselves was that Luang Por's behaviour showed no evidence of the presence of greed, hatred

\*See page 108, 'I walked down from Langka Mountain...'

\*\*More than one stage may be passed in a single period of meditation.

and delusion. On the contrary, he inspired in them a firm confidence that his actions were invariably motivated by wisdom and compassion; his teachings were profound and effective; and his knowledge of the subtleties of mind completely assured. They were confident that he was absolutely reliable and would never lead them astray.

## SUPERNORMAL

It was generally believed by his disciples that Luang Por possessed supernormal powers, in particular the ability to read minds. And this was another matter on which he was silent. What can be stated with some certainty is that whether or not Luang Por did, indeed, possess such powers, the belief that he did, definitely influenced his disciple's perceptions of him, and affected their practice. For many of the monks and nuns, it gave them an added motivation to let go of unwholesome thoughts. The idea that their teacher might know the kind of things their mind indulged in when swept along by a heedless mood was mortifying. It provided a strong support for as yet unstable virtues of wise shame and wise fear of consequences to mature.

But could Luang Por actually read minds? For a Buddhist, it is not a far-fetched notion. A brief trawl through the Buddhist scriptures will confirm that the Buddha acknowledged the existence of many supernormal abilities, and it will also reveal how uncontroversial that acknowledgement was to his contemporaries. It should not be surprising: the possibility that adept meditators may develop such abilities has never been seriously disputed in cultures in which meditation is widely practised. The Buddha debated with philosophers of every persuasion, including radical materialists, and yet he was never challenged over his recognition of psychic powers. It may be presumed that, by doing so, his opponents would have forfeited their credibility.

The Buddha himself possessed the full range of supernormal powers but revealed them sparingly. Of particular note was his refusal to use them as a means to gain converts to his teachings. In the Suttas, most of the infrequent occasions on which he displays his powers feature him teaching individuals with spiritual faculties sufficient for liberation but held back by strongly obstructive mental states. In such cases, the Buddha

reveals marvellous abilities as a teaching strategy, providing a thought-stopping shock intended to knock the person off their balance and open them to the Dhamma. Examples may be found in the Buddha's meetings with his father and the murderer Aṅgulimāla\*.

The Buddha was well aware of the fame and worldly temptations that would pursue monks who revealed psychic powers to the laity. When Ven. Piṇḍola levitated to the top of a pole in a public demonstration and brought down the sandalwood alms-bowl balanced on its peak, the Buddha strongly reproved him for behaving in an unseemly, unfitting manner:

*Just as a woman exhibits her private parts for the sake of a wretched little coin, even so, a performance of superhuman miracles is given by you to the laity for the sake of a wretched wooden bowl.*

Cv 5.26

The Buddha announced that an offence of wrongdoing would be committed by any monk who acted in such a way in the future.

The possession of psychic powers such as the ability to fly through the air or walk on water was acknowledged by the Buddha as a considerable accomplishment – one of three marvels (*pāṭihāriya*)\*\* – but also as a potentially serious distraction to the practice leading to liberation. Most importantly, the Buddha made it clear that such powers are not an indication of liberation. There have always been non-liberated meditators with supernormal powers and liberated meditators without them.

Although the disjunction between supernormal powers and liberation was first demonstrated by the Buddha's evil but psychically gifted cousin, Devadatta, the lesson has never really been absorbed. It is commonly assumed in the Buddhist cultures of Southeast Asia that liberation automatically confers supernormal powers (and that those possessing supernormal powers must surely be liberated). It was, therefore, almost inev-

\*Ja 547; MN 89

\*\*'pāṭihāriya' – a marvel or miracle. The Buddha spoke of three types of miracles: 1) the miracle of psychic power, 2) the miracle of mind-reading, and 3) the miracle of teaching or instruction.

itable that Luang Por was widely believed to be blessed with special abilities.

It is irrefutable that spiritual teachers become the objects of a great deal of projection and myth-making. This was certainly true of Luang Por. Many of the marvellous stories told about him must be taken with at least a pinch of salt. And yet, it would be as imprudent to reject all of the stories from principle, as it would be to accept every one of them out of faith.

It is true that the majority of the accounts of people believing that Luang Por read their minds are inconclusive. In many cases, a sceptic could probably attribute them to gullible believers reading specific references into broad or ambiguous statements. But there are also a number of occasions when a sceptical interpretation can only be sustained by stretching the bounds of credibility to its limits. And there are occasions when all common sense explanations are clearly inadequate. The reporters of these incidents were usually monks. A single example will suffice:

One day as a young monk returned from alms-round at Bahn Peung, a village a couple of kilometres to the south of Wat Pah Pong, he remembered thinking to himself, ‘I’m so hungry. I’m going to eat a big meal today. I’ll need to eat a ball of sticky rice the size of my head before I’m full.’ As he entered the monastery, he met Luang Por who, smiling, said:

So hungry you’re going to make a ball of sticky rice as big as your head, huh?

The monk’s face went a deep red. On that day, he said, he ended up eating far less than he did normally, rather than far more.

Over the years, Dr Utai, a close lay disciple and personal physician to Luang Por’s, observed many cases in which it seemed obvious to him that Luang Por knew what was in someone’s mind. One day he couldn’t resist asking him about it. All Luang Por would reply was:

It is related to samādhi. It’s not particularly profound, but it’s not something to speak of lightly either.

Fascination, whatever its object, and by its very nature, impedes the practice of Dhamma – and there are few things as fascinating as psychic

powers. Luang Por saw no advantage in feeding people's hunger for such matters. Whether in his formal discourses or in conversation, he rarely mentioned psychic powers. If people asked him questions about them, he would usually cut them short. Once someone asked him:

*Layman:* Luang Por, they say you are fully enlightened. Does that mean that you can fly through the air?

*Luang Por:* What's that got to do with it? Dung beetles can fly.

Luang Por would redirect conversations about miraculous powers to the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path to that cessation. When a school teacher asked him about the authenticity of passages he'd read in the Buddhist scriptures in which fully enlightened beings are credited with miraculous powers, Luang Por pointed to the forest around them and replied:

You're asking about things too far away. Why don't we talk about the tree stump that you're stubbing your toe on right here?

Of the three miracles (*pāṭihāriya*), the Buddha declared the third, the miracle of instruction, to be 'more sublime and noble' than psychic powers and the ability to read minds. The ability to lead the deluded human mind to truth was the greatest of marvels. To this day, when senior disciples of Luang Por are asked about his supernormal powers, they prefer to talk about his possession of the marvellous power of instruction.

But accounts of strange events will always survive, simply because they are so enjoyable. One, told by an elderly maechee, recalls the occasion that a huge king cobra\* appeared in Wat Pah Pong. Seeing its tail ended in a stump, Luang Por gave it the name 'Stumpy'. As he made his way on alms-round to Bahn Peung every day, Stumpy would slither along behind him. One day, a villager setting off to his fields noticed that Luang Por's footprints had been obscured by the marks of a large snake. Seeing this, he ran back into the village shouting, 'The Ajahn brought a snake with him on alms-round!' The frightened villagers followed the tracks which

\* A class of deities called *nāgas* are found throughout the Buddhist texts. They appear in the world as unusually large snakes, particularly king cobras. After his enlightenment, it is said that the Buddha was sheltered from the elements by the great *nāga* Mucalinda.

overlay Luang Por's all the way back to the monastery. The next morning, they spoke with him angrily:

*Villagers:* Ajahn, why do you bring a snake with you on alms-round?  
We won't put food in your bowl any more. We're afraid.

*Luang Por:* It's nothing to do with me. I didn't bring any snake.

*Villagers:* What do you mean? We've seen its marks. They completely obscure your footprints.

After Luang Por insisted that he had simply walked on alms-round as usual, a group of villagers went out to investigate. They discovered that the snake had followed Luang Por from the forest, entered the spirit house at the entrance to the village, waited for Luang Por to emerge and then followed him back to the monastery.

Luang Por had not seen the snake itself but had observed the marks it had left. The next morning as he left on alms-round, he stood at the edge of the forest and said loudly:

Stumpy, don't follow me on alms-round. The villagers are afraid of you. Go and find a place to live deep in the forest. Don't let people see you again. In the future, there will be a lot of people coming to the monastery, and they'll be afraid.

After that, the big king cobra was never seen again.

### III. SKETCHES

#### INSPIRING

A number of the qualities that came to define Luang Por in the eyes of his disciples were virtues held in universal regard. Perhaps the most prominent of these was that of patience. Although some accomplishments are necessarily private, the extent of a forest monk's capacity to endure through physical discomfort and the rigours of monastic life can never be so. As the leader of a monastic community, Luang Por's patience was visible to all. He earned the particular devotion of the monks of Wat Pah Pong by leading them from the front and by never asking them to do

anything that he would not do himself. He also became renowned for his forbearance when dealing with the problems attendant on running a large monastery: listening to and advising on the difficulties and doubts of the monks and novices and maechees and lay supporters. When Luang Por spoke about patience – and he spoke about it often – his words carried great weight.

Luang Por was also seen as a role model for the appropriate expression of gratitude, perhaps the virtue most central to Thai culture. In Thailand, a sense of gratitude is taken to be a key distinguishing mark of goodness. Accusations of ‘ingratitude’ are experienced as serious and hurtful, even devastating. In fact, ‘gratitude’ is a somewhat imprecise translation of the Thai ‘*kataññū-katavedi*’ (a term taken straight from the Pali) as the latter consists of two related virtues: ‘*kataññū*’ is the recognition of kindnesses received, and ‘*katavedi*’ the determination to appropriately express that recognition. Efforts to repay ‘the debt of gratitude’ are given particular emphasis in Thailand, especially in the case of key benefactors, such as parents and teachers.

Luang Por honoured his parents in a manner fitting to a monastic. As a young monk, he postponed his studies in order to nurse his father on his deathbed. During his travelling years, he regularly visited his mother and gave her Dhamma teachings. When he established Wat Pah Pong, he arranged for her to come to live in the monastery and become a nun under his guidance and protection.

Although Luang Por never practised under the guidance of a teacher for any great length of time, the sense of gratitude he felt for those who had helped him on the path was tangible. He always spoke with the greatest reverence of Luang Pu Mun, his spiritual father, meeting whom had been the pivotal experience in his life. He also often spoke with great affection and respect of Luang Pu Tongrat and Luang Pu Kinaree, the other two monks who had most strongly influenced him. Luang Pu Mun passed away in 1949, the year after Luang Por visited him in Nong Peu, while Luang Pu Tongrat died shortly after Luang Por’s return to Ubon in 1956. Luang Por was thus denied the opportunity to express his gratitude to them. But Luang Pu Kinaree lived on until 1980 and for many years prior to that, Luang Por sent a regular shift of monks from Wat Pah Pong to

act as attendants and nurses, as the old monk refused to have anything at all to do with the medical profession. When Luang Pu Kinaree died, Luang Por and his disciples organized the funeral and conducted all of the funeral rites.

Luang Por endeared himself to the lay supporters of Wat Pah Pong by showing an unwavering appreciation for their support, never taking it for granted. On important occasions in the lives of his long-time supporters, Luang Por would accept invitations to receive alms in their houses; when they were ill, he would visit them and give them encouragement; and at the end of their lives, he would lead the Sangha in performing the funeral rites. He once said to the Sangha:

When I knew a certain amount about myself, I thought about the laypeople. I saw the debt I owed to them everywhere, even people who'd only put one ladle of rice in my bowl. I wasn't heedless. I didn't forget. I thought of the kindness of every single person.

He constantly reminded his disciples to recall how their life depended on the generosity of lay supporters:

Giving food, lodging, and medicine in times of sickness, these aren't small matters. They're supporting our journey to Nibbāna. If we had no food, we wouldn't be able to make it, we wouldn't be able to meditate.

## PASSION

The Buddha distinguished two kinds of desire: that which is rooted in ignorance of the way things are (*taṇhā*, or craving), and that which is rooted in an understanding of the way things are. The first is to be abandoned; the second is to be cultivated. This second desirable kind of desire is explained as ‘the will towards goodness’ (*kusalachanda*) or ‘the will towards truth’ (*dhammachanda*). It manifests as a passion for Dhamma practice.

Luang Por was never short of passion. He once revealed that of the problems that he experienced in his monastic life, the only one that had caused him serious difficulty was the sexual desire that bedevilled him

throughout his twenties. Fortunately, his passion was never directed solely towards the world of the senses. The same energy propelled him into the monastery at a young age and manifested itself in his devotion to the Dhamma and Vinaya. As worldly lusts abated, this wholesome passion blossomed. The strength of his commitment to the Vinaya was expressed well in his avowal to his disciples that, ‘I’d rather die than transgress the Vinaya. I’d regret losing my life less than losing my virtue.’; and his enthusiasm for the Dhamma shone through when he compared the joy of facing up to the defilements as like the pleasure of eating extremely spicy food.

His practice was characterized by daring and boldness. The passion for truth gave him what in other ways of life would have been called an excellent work ethic. He remained undaunted in the face of obstacles and declared that, ‘*Nibbāna lies on the shores of death.*’ His zest for practice was such that his disciples, struggling to keep up, said that for him, it was as if there was no day or night. He once told a newly ordained Ajahn Chon that, ‘If you really knew how to bow to the Buddha, you would have tears in your eyes.’

But the passion that came to the fore in the prime of his life was for communicating his understanding of Dhamma to others. Training monastics was his first priority. They were the ones who were making the most sacrifices for the Dhamma, the ones who were giving their whole lives to the teachings. (In one of the Buddha’s similes, they were compared to the farmer’s most fertile well-drained soil.) He gave everything to this task, creating a system that was not overly reliant on him and which could survive his eventual death. The success of his efforts may be estimated by the steady growth of branch monasteries. When he stopped teaching, there were about sixty, and thirty years later there were over three hundred.

Luang Por’s passion for the Dhamma became clearly apparent whenever he began to teach. Even at times of serious illness, teaching the Dhamma would bring him alive. As he spoke, he would become more animated, his voice stronger, his presence more commanding. It seemed that, by giving voice to the Dhamma, he tapped into a deep source of energy. Between

these bursts of vitality, it was as if he shrank back into the shell of his ailing body. It was clear, that to Luang Por, Dhamma was indeed his life.

## CONTENTMENT

One of the cardinal monastic virtues praised by the Buddha is the cultivation of contentment with regards to whatever robes, food, lodging and medicines are offered to them with faith. Monastics are to be as light a burden as possible on lay supporters, and they should model a life which proves that happiness does not have to depend on the enjoyment of sense pleasures. It was a virtue much emphasized at Wat Pah Pong, and Luang Por led the way in the practice of it. He was admired for his frugality and the care with which he treated the offerings made to him. He received whatever robes were sewn for him without comment. He was never known to express desires for any particular kind of food. He showed no interest in beautiful things. As his reputation grew, wealthy lay supporters competed to offer him fine requisites, but he did not change.

On one occasion, a group of monks, following the lead of some other well-known monasteries, put forward the idea of registering Wat Pah Pong as a charitable foundation. Luang Por was getting old, and charitable status would guarantee the financial stability of the wat after his death. Luang Por gave them his opinion:

It's a good idea, but I don't think it's a correct one. With a charitable foundation, you would no longer be depending on your own pure practice. If you all practice well and correctly, you won't go without. The Buddha never set up a charity. He just shaved his head and lived as we do, and he did well enough. He laid out the path, and all we have to do is walk along it. That will, without doubt, be enough to keep you going. The bowl and robe – they are the charitable foundation that the Buddha established for us. With them, you will always receive more than you need.

Luang Por asserted that maintaining a standard of simplicity and cleanliness in the material world led to a clean and uncluttered mind. A popular maxim at Wat Pah Pong said, 'If you've got little, use little. If you've got a lot, use little.'

As the number of visitors to the monastery increased, so did the amount of the donations. Nobody would have given a second thought if Luang Por had taken advantage of this increase in funds to permit an upgrade to the comfort of his dwelling place. But he maintained the same frugal lifestyle as when he first established the monastery. It is true that the kuti built for him in the late 1960s was bigger than those of the other monks. But the increased size was simply a means to provide a large enough covered area below it where he could receive guests. The size of the room upstairs in which he slept was less than three metres by three. Almost completely bare, it contained a low wooden bed with an inch-thin mattress, and just the most necessary items of daily use, such as a water jug and spittoon. The toilet was in a small outhouse at the edge of the forest.

Luang Por distributed any gifts offered to him personally to his disciples or else sent them off to poor branch monasteries. All money and requisites offered to him went straight into a central Sangha fund. He had no personal funds or private bank account. He said:

We've got enough to eat and a place to live. What's the point of accumulating things? We only eat once a day.

On many occasions, laypeople would complain to Luang Por that, after they had made an invitation (*pavāraṇā*) to him for anything personal that he needed, he had never made any use of the funds. He said to the monks:

The more invitations laypeople make, the more wary I am.

Ajahn Anek spoke for many of the monks when he expressed the feelings that arose when he observed Luang Por's lack of greed:

"The thing which made me feel most proud and satisfied to be Luang Por's disciple, and the thing that inspired me the most, was his own practice. He was never one to accumulate offerings no matter what their value. He once said that as monks, the moment that we start accumulating things, then it's the beginning of the end.

"One year, to make merit on her birthday, Khun Ying Tun, [one of Luang Por's wealthiest lay supporters] offered Luang Por 90,000 baht.\*

\*Equivalent to approximately \$15,000 today.

“She insisted that the money should be used for his own personal needs, it was not to be used for the monastery. After she’d gone, Luang Por said that if there was any expense that involved him personally, we should use this money and not leave any over. So we used it to print a beautiful hardbacked edition of his teachings for free distribution.”

There has always been a certain amount of tension between the Isan forest monks and the titled administrator monks in the towns and cities. Whereas the forest monks have been critical of the perceived worldliness of the city monks, the city monks, for their part, have been dismissive of what they see as the forest monks’ rigid attachment to outdated forms, including the ascetic practice of eating out of the alms-bowl rather than from plates on a table. On one occasion, Luang Por was included in a group of monks invited to an offering of alms in the Royal Palace in Bangkok. He arrived at the same time as a certain senior monk, who looked scornfully at Luang Por’s alms-bowl.

“Chah, don’t you feel embarrassed about eating out of your bowl in front of the King?”

Luang Por replied:

Don’t you feel embarrassed about not eating out of your bowl in front of the Buddha?

#### EQUANIMITY

For many years, Luang Por was the subject of criticism and slander from a small number of jealous monks in Ubon. At the height of the Vietnam War, he was denounced as a Communist. One year, it was even whispered about that a senior monk had gone so far as to hire a hitman (in the Thailand of the time, not such an outlandish assertion). Although Luang Por did not die, the monk supposedly behind the plot did – from rabies. Time passed and Luang Por’s resolute refusal to add fuel to the flames of conflict allowed the situation to cool. Luang Por, having handled unjustified abuse with equanimity, now faced a new challenge: fame and popularity.

The Buddha was blunt on the dangers likely to beset a monk who becomes famous:

*A fatal thing are gains, favour and fame, a bitter, harsh impediment to the attainment of the unsurpassed freedom from bondage.*

*e.g. SN 17.1*

The temptation they provide to pride and arrogance is strong.

*It is just like a beetle, feeding on dung, gorged with dung, standing before a great dunghill, who might despise other beetles saying, ‘I am a dung-eater, full of dung, gorged with dung, and before me is this great dunghill.’*

*SN 17.5*

In the mobile, connected world of today, it is inevitable that an accomplished monk resident in a monastery for any length of time will, sooner or later, attract the attention of the laity. This was already true in the 1970s. During the Vietnam War, an ambitious program of road building was undertaken in Isan, primarily for military and national security reasons. One result was that it became much easier to visit forest monasteries. At a time of growing secularization and a wide-spread sense that the standard of the monastic order had never been so low, people started to look further afield for monks who were truly worthy of their respect. Luang Por’s name began to be included on the list of inspiring monks worth visiting.

A short biography of Luang Por written in 1968, by his disciple Ajahn Maha Amorn, was another milestone. Local businessmen in the city, civil servants, and army and air force officers posted in Ubon started to arrive in greater numbers. Soon, Luang Por was known to the lay Buddhists of Bangkok. Coachloads of merit-makers started to arrive. This new state of affairs was impressed upon the monastery when two members of the King’s Privy Council visited to ask questions on Dhamma practice. Sometime later, Luang Por was invited to receive alms in the Royal Palace.

The publication of books of Luang Por’s transcribed Dhamma talks both in the Thai originals and in English translation were initiated by his Western disciples in the late 1970s. Following Luang Por’s admonition that the Dhamma should never be bought and sold, they were made available for free distribution. These books, followed by the first set of audio

cassette tapes, spread Luang Por's name throughout Thailand and the English translations gave him an international audience. Before long, his teachings were being translated into German, French, Spanish, Chinese and other languages.

Luang Por seemed as unmoved by this newfound fame and status as he was by abuse and slander. On the fifth of December, 1973, he received from King Bhumibol Adulyadej the monastic honour of *Chao Khun*, with the title 'Phra Bodhinyana Thera'. On his return from Bangkok, a large crowd was waiting to greet him at Ubon Railway Station. A long procession of cars and trucks escorted him back to the monastery where many hundreds more people were waiting. Once there, a grand merit-making ceremony took place to celebrate the honour conferred by the King on their teacher. Throughout it all, Luang Por remained a cool, still centre at the heart of the excitement and joy. When the laypeople formally invited him to give a Dhamma talk, he spoke of his feelings at receiving the title. He said the title of Chao Khun was a worldly convention. He was the same Luang Por that he had been a few days before. Worldly dhammas of gain and loss, fame and obscurity, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, are all fickle and changing. Knowing the nature of worldly dhammas, the mind is not moved by them.

The bridge over the River Moon always remains the same. It doesn't arch up if the waters rise. It doesn't sag if the waters fall.

## PERSONALITY

It would seem obvious that any detailed discussion of a person's life must, sooner or later, focus on his or her personality. It tends to be assumed that it is in the personality that the essence of a person is to be found. But this apparent truism requires certain qualifications in the case of liberated beings, or those practising for liberation. In such cases, the personality is fluid. Personality traits based on defilements, such as greed and anger, shrink and disappear; those traits free of defilement, like kindness and compassion, grow and mature.

In the case of liberated beings, those character traits, eccentricities and elements of personality that are not sustained by defilement survive

their enlightenment. Inarticulate aspirants become inarticulate arahants, stern aspirants become stern arahants, charismatic aspirants become charismatic arahants. There is no fixed mould. And just as bright and radiant people may occasionally prove to be deluded or mentally unbalanced, so too the most unprepossessing figures may, in fact, be fully liberated. Luang Por once compared enlightened beings to birds of different species, differing in size, wingspan, colouring, sound and so on, but all recognizably members of the bird family.

The second qualification that must be made in speaking of the personality of enlightened beings is that they do not have the same relationship to their personality as a normal person: liberation in the Buddhist sense means freedom from all identification with personality and personal history.

Be that as it may, unenlightened beings, identifying with their own body and mind, cannot help but perceive an enlightened person in the same way that they perceive themselves: as embodied agents. And it is because that is so, that the personality of great beings is significant. For many students, it may be a response to the teacher's personality, rather than an intellectual assent to the teachings, that proves the deciding factor as to whether or not they take up the Buddhist training seriously or, having taken it up, bear with it.

Luang Por was one of the more charismatic kinds of bird. One of his brothers said of him, 'I wouldn't exactly say he was a handsome man; but when you were in his presence you couldn't take your eyes off him.' Other members of his family had this same magnetism albeit to a lesser extent. For many years, one of the regular features of an Observance Day at Wat Pah Pong would be Luang Por's eldest brother, Por Lah, sitting in the kitchen surrounded by a small crowd of people expounding on some subject, recounting an anecdote or telling a story. The style was unmistakeable.

Western monks would comment on how Luang Por seemed to be so completely who he was. In other words, they could discern no false notes in his manner, no hints of insecurity or conceit. As the centre of attention, he showed as much self-consciousness as a lion on a plain surrounded by

safari jeeps. He remained the same, whatever the surrounding conditions. One monk said he was like a mountain that was unaffected by the rain, snow or shine that came and went around it. And yet, there was a paradox: although he impressed those around him as a figure of absolute authenticity, he could, at the same time, slip personas on and off like items of clothing. But the more unpredictable he might be in what he said, or how he expressed himself at any one moment, the more unchanging he seemed.

Occasionally, as Ajahn Sumedho would remark, it was as if Luang Por withdrew from his personality altogether:

“Sometimes I’d look at him and there’d be just no-one there ... The look he had of total emptiness was quite moving because you realized that the personality was just something he used as a compassionate tool.”

Sitting under his kuti receiving guests, Luang Por would flow between quite different modes as the situation required. On any given day, he might have just finished comforting a bereaved father in homely Lao, then switch to Central Thai to explain some point of doctrine with Bangkok academics, and then go on to admonish a monk for a sloppy job of repair work on one of the kutis. This would go on throughout the day. It was not the ‘multi-tasking’ familiar to business executives. He was fully present in every moment, giving no sign of mental stress in moving from one mode to another and no emotional run-over. When telling a favourite story, he would chuckle as he got to the funny part as if it were the first time he had told it. At such times, there was no trace of the vanity and bombast of the ‘great man’ with a captive audience, nor the slightest acknowledgement that many of his audience knew the story well. It was a stronger teaching about being in the moment than any amount of theoretical instruction could impart. Ajahn Chon was one of the monks who marvelled at such sessions:

“One evening, Luang Por was sitting on the wicker seat underneath his kuti talking to a small group of monks about the old days, and I was in my favourite position massaging his feet. His manner was so warm and inspiring that I felt utterly content. I could have sat there the whole night without complaint. Then a torch beam moved through the forest towards

us. It was Ven. Dto. He was a quite senior monk who had transgressed a serious Vinaya training rule (*Saṅghādisesa*) and was undergoing *mānatta*, the prescribed purificatory practices. Ven. Dto had brought some of Luang Por's freshly washed robes to put away upstairs. Without any stiffening in his body, Luang Por suddenly barked at him in the harshest possible way. The contrast with the atmosphere in our small group made the hair on my back stand on end. At that moment, Luang Por was utterly ferocious. Ven. Dto quickly did what he had to do, bowed and left. Then Luang Por continued our conversation as if nothing had happened.

“He made no comment about Ven. Dto and didn’t refer to what had just happened at all. It was as if it had never happened. I suddenly felt very heedless. The intimacy I’d felt holding his foot in my hand and the enjoyment of the conversation had made me forget that here was someone who dwelt somewhere far beyond my scope and comprehension. I felt a strong compulsion to be mindful and alert. I realized that I could take nothing for granted.”

Another monk spoke of Luang Por being a mirror in which you always saw yourself. His ability to reflect people’s attention back on their own defilements was not due to him adopting an even emotional tone; rather it was the consistent lack of self in whatever mode he was expressing. And so, his disciples loved him. And feared him in an inexplicable, visceral way.

#### SENSE OF HUMOUR

One of the personality traits that marked Luang Por as a boy and endured throughout his life was his sense of humour. It was a quality that always drew people to him and made them enjoy his company. As a teenage novice, Luang Por was notorious amongst his friends for how much he found funny and how easily he could burst into laughter. As he got older, Luang Por curbed his tendency to lose his composure at the sight of the incongruous, the ridiculous and the self-important – but his enjoyment of them never seemed to fade. He became adept at allowing his sense of humour to shape teachings that, delivered more sternly, might have been less easily received. He pointed to people’s arrogance and superstitions and foolishness in ways that bypassed their habitual defences, leaving

them disarmed and wiser. As a teacher, he would have agreed with the saying that comedy is a humorous way of saying serious things.

Luang Por's rich sense of humour did not mean that he told jokes: to do so would have been considered inappropriate for a *samaṇa*. He did not set himself up as an entertainer, nor did he try to make people laugh for the sake of it. He never spoke in ways that made fun of others' ethnicity, religion or sexuality, or that tapped into peoples' prejudices in any way. He allowed his sense of humour to reveal itself only within the limits provided by the Vinaya. These limits are stringent. It is forbidden, for example, to speak in jest about the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. The logic behind this is that, by not trivializing the refuges, the uplifting emotions meant to be inspired by them remain uncompromised. Lying in jest is included in the precepts governing unskilful speech and so precludes most kinds of playfulness, and the prohibition against inciting anxiety prevents practical jokes. There is a long list of conversational topics which monks are to avoid altogether, unless to illustrate a point of Dhamma:

*Kings, robbers, ministers, armies, dangers, wars, food, drink, clothes, beds, garlands, perfumes, relatives, carriages, villages, towns and cities, countries, women, heroes, street - and well - gossip, talk of the departed, desultory chat, speculations about land and sea, talk about being and non-being.*

e.g. AN 10.69

From such injunctions, there would seem to be little left for monks to talk about at all, much less to speak about amusingly. This is far from the case. When Luang Por was in the mood, his exuberance was infectious. When telling an anecdote, expanding upon the absurd and incongruous forms in which defilement could manifest, or mimicking someone under the sway of greed or anger, he could provoke a genuine sense of delight in his audience. Luang Por's gift for physical comedy provoked wide grins and even giggles. One of his favourite stories concerned a mangy dog who blamed his suffering on the places he found himself in, rather than the mange he carried with him. Luang Por liked to accompany this story with bewildered scratchings at his body and armpit. Even the most composed monks would find themselves chuckling. Although he did not tell jokes as

such, Luang Por had the timing of a comedian. He was a gifted raconteur and knew well how to ratchet up the expectation during the course of a teaching story, and deflate it expertly with the twist at the end of the tale.

Like most intelligent people brought up in a predominantly oral culture, Luang Por took great delight in puns and wordplay; his discourses are sprinkled with them. Examples from his talks might be cited to show his wit, verbal dexterity and ingenuity but would fail to transmit the essential point of them: the pleasure they provided. It is hard to convey how much people enjoyed it when Luang Por, referring to the corruption of the *tudong* tradition caused by monks accepting lifts in cars rather than walking, called it ‘*taludong*’ or ‘in one end of the forest and straight out the other’.

Some of the most memorable examples of Luang Por’s sense of humour occurred through off-the-cuff comments or replies to questions. Often, they involved him invoking fresh, unexpected ways of looking at familiar issues, thereby puncturing his audience’s attachments. For those of other cultures, and thus with other conventions and beliefs, such humour – especially in translation – tends to fall flat. However, a couple of examples may give something of the flavour of his humorous comments.

On one occasion, a young man, newly conscripted into the army, asked Luang Por for a Buddha medallion to wear around his neck as a protection against bullets. He was following in an old tradition. Monks have been known to provide empowered amulets to soldiers for hundreds of years. Luang Por, however, always refused to do so. Before explaining why, he pointed to the life-size brass Buddha statue on the shrine:

Take that one if you like. Carry it in front of you and no bullets will get you, for sure.

As the human body does not vary from one culture to another, humour derived from it is more universal. Ajahn Sumedho recalls the time that Luang Por took him to visit some of the great masters of the Luang Pu Mun tradition. In Udon Province, they paid their respects to one elderly master, believed to be an arahant, who was confined to a wheelchair and rarely spoke. Luang Por had recently been offered a cassette recorder and was using it to record Dhamma teachings. It was placed in front of

the venerable old monk who sat there quietly smiling at them. After a suitable time had elapsed and it was clear that he was not going to speak, they prepared to bow to him and leave. At that moment, the great master farted. Back in the car, Luang Por replayed the tape. The sound of the fart was clearly audible. Luang Por looked at Ajahn Sumedho and said:

That was a good teaching.

#### STERN AND FIERCE

The warm, radiant loving-kindness that so many lay Buddhists remarked feeling in Luang Por's presence in his later years was, for most of his teaching career, eclipsed by its companion virtue of compassion. As Luang Por entered middle age, the young monks in their early twenties saw him more and more as a father figure. Generally, their view of him was not so much as a fount of unconditional love, but rather as the wise parent who found the ways in which his sons created suffering for themselves to be unacceptable. Or to use another analogy, he was seen to be like a doctor with an unwavering determination to help his patients overcome a chronic illness, even if that should entail procedures that the patients might not enjoy, or might even resist. And like patients, his disciples submitted because they were confident that the doctor knew what he was talking about.

Luang Por's compassion could manifest as fierceness, a trait which he shared with a number of other great teachers in his tradition. In Luang Ta Maha Bua's biography of his teacher, Luang Pu Mun, the great master is presented as a stern figure who was often harsh with his disciples. Luang Ta Maha Bua himself – until his death in 2011, the most widely revered of the great master's direct disciples in Thailand – was famed and feared for the same qualities throughout his life. Although many of Luang Pu Mun's disciples were known for their gentleness and reserve (and some of them felt there were more of those qualities in Luang Pu Mun than was widely acknowledged), the figure of the fierce teacher became something of an icon in the Forest Tradition. Certainly, Luang Pu Mun, the archetypical stern teacher, was astonishingly successful in leading his disciples to stages of liberation. And of his Dhamma heirs, Luang Ta Maha Bua was acknowledged for his excellence in this regard.

Luang Por's sternness, especially in his middle age, has been referred to in the previous chapter. It was a trait that increased the respect with which the young monks held him. They had grown up in an authoritarian culture, and this kind of sternness and occasional fierce admonishment was something they were familiar with. Too much overt kindness would have endeared Luang Por to his disciples but at the expense of the intensity of purpose he was trying to instill in them. The policy he adopted towards heedless conduct was one of zero tolerance. Not even the smallest of misdemeanours were overlooked. Strong admonishments were dished out from the Dhamma seat almost every night.

The results were mixed. The more dedicated the practitioner, the better it worked. Some monks, however, unable to thrive in the high-pressure atmosphere, disrobed; and it is possible that a number of them might have survived in the robes if they had lived in a more relaxed environment. Most, however, found the fear they felt for Luang Por empowering. They appreciated how the constant demand to be aware kept their defilements at bay – more than mere encouragement could ever have accomplished. Luang Por was not seen so much as an authority figure scolding them personally, as the embodiment of Dhamma-Vinaya censuring their defilements. There was always the danger that this enthusiasm for practice would be too dependent on the presence of Luang Por to be a sustainable refuge. But it was often the case that it jump-started a passion for Dhamma that became second nature.

As Luang Por aged, the fierce side of his personality receded, and the sternness ceded centre stage to a warmer, more grandfatherly persona. But the sharp, clear-eyed discrimination was never completely submerged. The discourse he delivered to the Sangha in 1980, later translated into English as *Toilets on the Path*<sup>\*</sup>, demonstrates that even at the end of Luang Por's teaching career he could deliver one of his legendary stinging admonitions. Luang Por missed nothing. One monk referred to sitting in Luang Por's presence and feeling as if he was a tiger dwelling within a Cheshire cat.

<sup>\*</sup> cf. *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*

Luang Por treasured his independence. He counselled his disciples to keep a distance from the wealthy and the powerful because association with such people was dangerous to a monk's integrity. It was a standard he himself upheld throughout his life. Monks can easily find themselves compromising the standards of simplicity and frugality in their monasteries out of consideration for the desire of wealthy donors to make merit. Luang Por never did so.

It is surprisingly common for forest monasteries in Thailand to become dominated by a single lay supporter, usually a woman. These women, often believed to have some ancient kammic connection to the abbot, are ceded power and influence in the running of the monastery. If they have donated the land on which the monastery was built or have contributed substantially to its construction, their position tends to be especially strong. These women are usually of middle age, most often married, and their relationship to the abbot is almost always free from any suggestion of impropriety. They are jokingly referred to throughout the Buddhist community as 'godmothers'. While such persons may relieve the abbot of tiresome administrative duties, they can seriously skew his relationship with the monastery's lay community, and even members of the Sangha may become jealous of their influence. Wat Pah Pong never had a 'godmother'. Luang Por showed great skill and diplomacy in preventing any lay Buddhist, male or female, from establishing a special, favoured position in the wat. His independence and refusal to have favourites or an inner circle of disciples enhanced the trust in which he was held and the harmony and loyalty of his disciples.

An example of Luang Por's determination to do things as he saw fit, irrespective of the wishes of his lay supporters, may be seen from an account given by Ta Soei who had led a rather colourful life as a layman until Luang Por took him under his wing. On a number of occasions, Luang Por took Ta Soei as his attendant on walking expeditions. During a trip to central Thailand, he accepted the invitation of a devoted couple to rest up at their house situated on the coast outside Bangkok.

“It was a lovely place. I could’ve stayed there for ages, but after three nights, Luang Por tells me to pack his things and arrange some transport; it’s time to leave. I’m a bit disgruntled. I say, ‘Wouldn’t it be better to tell the owner of the house first?’ He said, ‘No. If we do that, they won’t let us leave. We didn’t make any promises about how long we were going to stay. We can’t let them tie us up in obligations.’

“Well anyway, the caretaker must see something’s up and phones his boss in Bangkok. Luang Por tells the taxi driver to take us to Aranya Pratet out on the Cambodian border. We’re only about ten kilometres down the road though, when the lady of the house comes racing up behind us in her car, overtakes us and blocks off the road ahead. She jumps down out of the vehicle, rushes over and bows to him right there in the middle of the road, sobbing and crying: ‘Oh! Luang Por. You can’t leave yet. You’ve only just arrived. I’ve hardly had any time to speak with you, and you’re going to abandon your daughter already.’

“Within moments, her husband arrives in his car, and so there’s a second vehicle blocking the road. But they can beg and plead all day and all night, Luang Por’s not going to change his mind. All he’ll say is wait till the next time. Then the man starts to cry as well. The woman asks the taxi driver how much he’s charging and he says 400 baht. She pulls the money out of her handbag and puts it on the dashboard. Luang Por just sits there impassive. He tells the driver to start the engine. And so, the last we see of the two of them, they’re squatting down by the side of the road, their hands in anjali, looking totally dejected.”

Much later, paying respects to Luang Por in Bangkok, the couple could laugh at the whole affair.

#### IV. FROM HEART TO HEART

##### COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Today, Luang Por’s wider reputation rests, above all, on his ability to communicate the Dhamma. His Dhamma talks circle the world in print, on screens, and as audible files on a variety of modern devices. Throughout his life of teaching, he modelled two qualities of the kalyāṇamitta

specifically concerned with communication skills: firstly, the ability to speak effectively, to get through to people, to counsel and admonish; and secondly, the ability to explain profound matters with clarity and accuracy.

From his earliest days as a teacher, even before the establishment of Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por's gift for articulating the teachings had been clearly apparent. He became highly skilled in adapting his discourses to the needs of his audience, adept at using everyday objects to illustrate profound topics in simple terms. The Buddha taught that Dhamma should be taught in a way that clarified, convinced, roused and gladdened the mind of the listener. Those who listened to Luang Por teaching over a long period would assert that those four words summed it up very well.

The Isan culture into which Luang Por was born has always delighted in the skilful use of language. He grew up in an environment in which the ability to speak eloquently, dexterously and with humour was prized on every level of society. Isan folk music is full of wit and invention. When Luang Por was young, contests that involved the composition of extempore rhymes were a feature of harvest time. Given these conditions, it might be said that Luang Por's speaking skills were not especially unusual. It was the use to which he put them that set him apart. The unrehearsed and vernacular Dhamma talks he gave retained the energy and spark of folk oratory in a religious context formerly dominated by stiff and mannered text-based sermons.

Luang Por was not the first monk in Thailand to teach in this way. The down-to-earth style of discourse was one of the characteristic features of the teachings given by the great Luang Pu Mun and his disciples as they wandered through the Isan countryside. Luang Por felt himself an inheritor of this tradition and became, perhaps, its finest exponent.

Transcriptions of Luang Por's Dhamma talks have been read and treasured by huge numbers of Thai Buddhists; translations of the transcriptions have made them available in many other languages. Nevertheless, as written records of oral teachings are necessarily restricted to content, they can only provide a one-dimensional record of the magic and emotional power of the originals. The two hundred or so audio files, salvaged from

old cassette recordings, provide a more complete experience. In them, Luang Por's voice is utterly compelling – the natural, unassailable authority of his voice augmented by a palpable benevolence. The vast majority of the transcribed talks are from the last four years of his teaching career.\* By this time, he was, in many ways, an old man – his body prematurely aged. There is a pronounced paternal tone to these talks and an ever-present undercurrent of humour and warmth.

The key feature of Luang Por's Dhamma talks was their spontaneity. Luang Por maintained that Dhamma talks could not, and should not, be prepared beforehand. Although he would often have a general theme in his mind when he began to talk, it might soon be discarded as his mind settled into a more fertile groove. He once mentioned to a disciple that sometimes he ascended to the high Dhamma seat and still would have no idea of what he was going to talk about.

But after I've finished the *Namo* invocation and composed my mind, then it comes by itself and starts to flow.

Referring to this sense of an unforced flow of Dhamma emerging from within him, he compared it to the speech of a scholar learned from a book:

The Dhamma that comes from the heart flows like water from a spring that never runs dry. But the knowledge that comes from memory is like rainwater in a jar. Once the rainy season is over, it soon comes to an end.

In his middle age, Luang Por was still a remarkably vigorous man, and his Dhamma talks reflected that. He would generate an incredible energy as a talk progressed. Ajahn Reuangrit recalled that some of the more fiery discourses would confront the defilements of the listeners in such an uncompromising fashion that:

\*To mark Luang Por's 100th birth anniversary in 2018, a new book of ten Dhamma talks is being published in the Thai language. These discourses were originally given in Isan language and recorded on reel-to-reel tapes, with very poor sound quality. The tapes have now been digitally re-mastered, transcribed and translated into Thai. It is hoped that an English translation will follow before too long.

“It would really hurt. You’d be black and blue from the first night. If you couldn’t take it, you’d leave within three days; if you stayed, you wouldn’t ever want to leave.”

Occasionally, Luang Por would launch straight into a theme that was on his mind. More usually, he would begin a talk with a few general phrases, a familiar riff, even a meander or two, as he eased himself into the talk, biding time, allowing a theme to emerge by itself, which – within a few seconds, a few minutes – it inevitably did. Then, almost visibly, as if something had clicked into place, the talk would assume a clear trajectory. Gradually, as the power and focus of his words began to crank up inexorably, listeners would feel themselves being swept along by a powerful surge of Dhamma.

For newly arrived Western monks, as yet unfamiliar with the language and cultural norms, some of the high-octane Dhamma discourses given in Isan dialect could sound uncomfortably akin to rants. But over time, it would become clear to them that something more profound was taking place. The audience at such talks showed no signs of agitation. Many sat with eyes closed in meditation. Those with eyes open were alert and intent.

#### AN EVOLUTION

Although Luang Por’s Dhamma talks were largely concerned with universal and timeless truths of the human condition, they were also very much grounded in the time and place in which they were given. Especially in the case of a speaker of Luang Por’s gifts, the impromptu, stream-of-consciousness style of speaking can allow for a profound symbiosis between speaker and audience. It is this unique element to the talks which is impossible to preserve in transcriptions.

On a more mundane level, the power of Luang Por’s Dhamma talks may be explained in terms of the classic principles of rhetoric, whereby the audience’s positive regard for the speaker must precede and underpin the logic of the talk and its emotional impact. Luang Por’s *ethos* was potent: not only did he radiate a considerable personal charisma, but he also spoke with an authority derived from his age, his role as abbot and his

position as their teacher. Most importantly of all, he was believed by his audience to be a fully enlightened master. He gave such a firm impression that he was speaking from direct experience rather than from a memory of the texts, that his words would go straight to the hearts of his listeners.

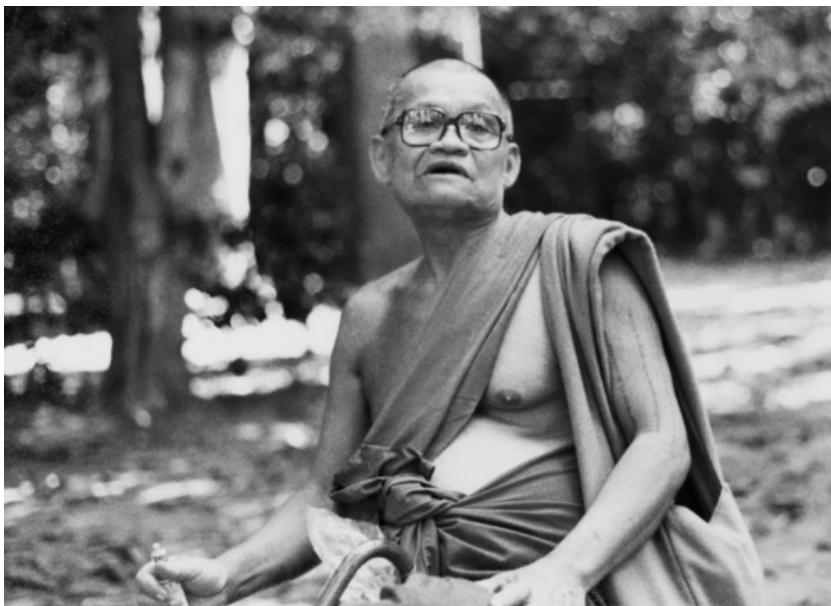
For many years, Luang Por gave Dhamma talks almost exclusively in the Isan dialect that was his mother tongue, a language that lends itself easily to oratory and storytelling. But as increasing numbers of people from Bangkok started to make their way to Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por began speaking in Central Thai more and more. It was not a huge leap: Isan and Thai share much of the same vocabulary. However, this similarity is not always immediately obvious, masked by a difference in certain consonants and by the different tones in which the words are pronounced. (For example, the high tone Thai word '*ron*' [hot] is a low tone '*hon*' in Isan.)

Initially, occasional lapses into Isan or passages of unusual syntax showed that Luang Por was not completely comfortable speaking in Central Thai. These slight glitches disappeared after a few years, but Luang Por's Thai style always retained a distinctive character. Until the end of his life, he always said '*michanan*' or '*otherwise*', when he meant '*prochanan*' or '*consequently*'. The slightly modified Isan idioms that appeared in his talks, clothed in Thai, conveyed an especial freshness and charm.

Coinciding with this shift into the Thai language, came a move to a less rousing, more reflective style of delivery in Luang Por's discourses. It is debatable to what extent the change was due to the shift of language itself and how much to his physical decline. It was not exactly the case that he'd never spoken in this way before, but now it became the dominant mode. Ajahn Reuangrit was one of the monks who enjoyed the new style.

"You'd listen and feel an exhilaration in the Dhamma, and you'd feel good after the talk was over. If you had any wisdom, you'd learn a lot because he spoke gently, it was easy on the ear. And so, he changed. The basic content of the talks remained the same, but the flavour was better."

But whatever changes of tone might have occurred, the primary distinguishing characteristics of Luang Por's Dhamma talks remained constant from his early talks until his last great discourses in the Rains Retreat of 1982.



They were delivered using simple language with a minimum of theory (as a contemporary of Luang Pu Mun once put it, ‘as simple as could be, but no simpler’) and employed plentiful similes using objects and experiences with which the listeners were familiar to explain the subtle realities of the mind. Occasionally, he would intersperse anecdotes from his own experiences and from those of his teachers, contemporaries and disciples. This gave his listeners an enjoyable and absorbing experience, rather like reading a book that they couldn’t put down.

He said that listening to Dhamma talks requires a special attitude:

Keep listening, keep listening. Don’t just believe what you hear and don’t disbelieve. Make yourself neutral. Keep listening. It will bring good results, and there’s no danger in it. The peril lies in believing too much in what you hear, or in disbelieving. Listen and contemplate. This is what practice is about: being a listener and being one who reflects on things. As you don’t know yet whether the things you like and dislike are true or not, the Buddha said that, for the time being, you should keep listening. If you don’t, you’ll just follow your own opinions about things, and if you do that, then you will develop wrong view, and

your practice won't advance. The wise person is one who keeps looking, contemplating, continually reflecting.

The true Dhamma is not something that can be communicated with words. You can't appropriate someone else's knowledge. If you take someone else's knowledge, then you have to meditate on it. Listening to someone else and understanding what they say doesn't mean that your defilements will come to an end. You have to take that understanding and then chew on it and digest it until it's a sure thing and really your own.

In the mid-1970s during the construction of a road up to the peak of Tam Saeng Pet,\* Luang Por had amazed his disciples with his physical stamina. Within a short time, his health declined to the degree that he had to reduce the number of formal Dhamma talks he delivered to perhaps two or three discourses a month. He told his disciples to look on the bright side: if he gave too many talks, they might simply memorize his words and delude themselves into believing that they truly understood what they did not. Intoxicated by the Dhamma, they might neglect their own practice and get caught in lecturing others about inner peace, with their own minds still hot and confused. For his disciples, who looked forward to his talks so eagerly, it was not one of his most convincing arguments.

On another occasion, Luang Por said that the task of the teacher lay more in providing supportive conditions for practice than in giving frequent discourses. He said that if you provide a bull with a meadow to graze in, then graze is what it will do; its nature is to eat grass, and it doesn't need to be persuaded to do it. Any animal standing in the middle of a meadow and not grazing, he said, is no bull – maybe it's a pig. In other words, a monk demonstrates his sincerity (his 'monk-ness') by the degree to which he takes advantage of the monastic environment. For those devoted to the training, formal instruction is only an auxiliary support.

#### SIMILES LIKE KEYS FOR UNLOCKING THE TRUTH

One of the most prominent features of Luang Por's Dhamma talks was the use of vivid simile. 'The untrained mind is like a water buffalo ... The

\*See page 429, 'The most legendary...'

different stages of meditation develop like the maturing of a mango ...’ So many of Luang Por’s talks are peppered with vivid similes, and it was this ability to draw analogies between abstract principles and everyday objects familiar to his audience that most clearly expressed his gift for communicating the Dhamma. It was his mastery of similes, more than any other rhetorical skill, that helped to make his talks so entertaining and lucid.

Similes demystified the teachings for his audience, brought them down to earth and made them less intimidating, more immediate and practical. Luang Por was particularly skilled in choosing similes appropriate to his audience. Teaching the local villagers (or indeed the monks, most of whom came from farming families), the images were predominantly agricultural: they featured rice plants and buffaloes, fruit orchards and fish nets. Teaching members of the armed forces, the similes would often be martial or draw from the world of Thai boxing. For urban audiences, he would tend to use the objects around him that they could see and hear: a water kettle, a glass, a spittoon. While he used some similes over and over again during his teaching career, others occurred to him spontaneously in the midst of a discourse or while answering questions, as his mind sought a way to translate the truths he had experienced into terms his audience could understand. It was exhilarating for his listeners to see him effortlessly employ elements of the world around him to embody timeless truths.

Animals of all kinds appear in these similes: snakes, dogs, millipedes, water buffaloes, frogs and many more. Chickens were a particular favourite. Seeking to express how mistaken and ridiculous it would be for someone to rest satisfied with gaining an intellectual knowledge of Buddhist teachings and not to use it as an aid to abandon defilement, he said, was like someone raising chickens and eating the chicken shit rather than the eggs. The difference in behaviour between heedless and heedful monks he described in terms of the differing behaviours of domesticated chickens and the wild chickens that lived in Wat Pah Pong.

Some of the most profound and beautiful of Luang Por’s similes shed light upon experiences in meditation. In one memorable image, he compared the mind existing in a state both at peace and yet primed to respond

intelligently to conditions, to that of a bell at rest. When a bell is rung and its natural silence disturbed by a forceful stimulus, the bell responds with a beautiful sound that, after a suitable duration, returns to silence. In the same way, he said, the mind should dwell ‘with few wishes’ in the present moment; when a challenge arises, it should overcome that challenge with wisdom, and then, like a bell, return to a natural state of rest.

Visible forms, sounds, odours, tastes, physical sensations and thoughts constantly impinge upon the mind, encouraging like, dislike, attachment. Luang Por explained how the stabilized mind, turning its attention to the three characteristics of existence, is unwavering in the face of sense contact. He said that impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self are like a seashore, and the sense objects surging into the mind are like the waves.

It’s like waves breaking on the shore. After a wave hits the shore, it breaks up and a new one appears in its place. Waves can reach no further than the shore. In the same way, sense objects can now go no further than our sense of knowing. Meeting the perception of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self, they split apart and disappear.

#### ZEN OF A KIND

In the mid-1970s, Luang Por acquired, as it were, another arrow to his rhetorical bow. He was much taken with Ajahn Buddhadasa’s newly published translations of the works of the Chinese Zen Masters Hui Neng and Huang Po\*. He found these texts gave him a new and fresh vocabulary to express the Dhamma. Western monks who had practised in the Zen tradition added to his knowledge. The influence that these translated texts had upon the way he taught may be observed in a number of his later Dhamma discourses. There are, for example, a number of references to the mind (*citta*) in terms comparable to how the phrase ‘original mind’ is used in Zen texts. On one occasion, he compared the mind to a leaf that is naturally still but flutters about because of the wind of mental states:

\*Hui Neng (6th Century) was the Sixth Zen Patriarch and author of the *Platform Sutra*. Huang Po (9th Century) was the subject of the book *Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*.

If it understood the nature of thoughts, the mind would stay still. This is called the natural state of the mind. And why we have come to practise now is to see the mind in this pristine state.

Luang Por affirmed that liberation was known, not through an escape from the world of convention, but from seeing it in its true light. It was the attachment to contingent realities as ultimately real that was the problem. This would seem to be his response to the Mahayana teaching of the identity of *samsāra* and *Nibbāna*:

Now if we know conventional reality, then we'll know liberation.  
If we clearly know liberation, then we'll know convention. This is to know the Dhamma. Here, there is completion.

In conversation, he would sometimes enjoy using the paradoxical phrasing of profound truths that is characteristic of Zen. On one occasion, he asked one of the Western monks to send a letter to Ajahn Sumedho in England. He said, 'Ask Sumedho: "If you can't go forward and you can't go back, and you can't stand still, what can you do?"'

There is no evidence that Zen teachings modified Luang Por's understanding of Dhamma. It was more as if an artist at the height of his powers had found a new medium in which to express himself, a painter in oils exploring the use of water colours. A characteristic flexibility of his mind allowed him to open to this new way of presenting the Dhamma. He interpreted the texts he read in light of his own understanding, and then integrated them into the teachings which he gave to his disciples.

#### IN CONVERSATION

As Luang Por got older, more and more of his teaching was conducted informally. He no longer led the morning and evening sessions in the Dhamma Hall. He would spend many hours a day seated on a wide wicker seat in the floored and open-sided space beneath his kuti. There, accompanied by a small number of attendants, he would receive a steady stream of lay visitors eager to make merit, to receive blessings, advice and inspiration. At night time, after the evening chanting and meditation session in the Dhamma Hall was over, more resident monks would make their way through the forest to his kuti. Most would stay until Luang

Por retired for the night, some conversing with Luang Por, others sitting quietly in the shadows, enjoying the atmosphere and the warmth and directness of his teachings. Some monks would massage his feet or his hands as he chatted and chewed betel nut.

The monks considered the opportunity to attend upon Luang Por while he answered Dhamma questions to be a special treat. They particularly enjoyed the rare occasion when somebody came to argue with him. After one such occasion, a monk remarked to his friend that it was like watching a great master of martial arts effortlessly dealing with a clumsy opponent who foolishly believed that he was better than he was. Ajahn Chon cherished the memory of being a part of such occasions:

“I’d feel this marvellous sense that I was participating in a long tradition of students sitting in the middle of the forest at the feet of their teacher, receiving words of wisdom straight from his mouth. It was the joy of being in the presence of someone I was convinced knew all that needed to be known. I could not imagine anyone being able to ask him any important question whatsoever about life that he would not be able to answer immediately and with absolute authority. It gave me an intense feeling of well-being.”

Answering questions and engaging in Dhamma dialogue was a mode of teaching that Luang Por seemed to particularly enjoy. On one occasion, following a session with a visiting Western monk from another tradition, some of the resident monks were unhappy with the visitor’s aggressive manner. Luang Por said:

No, it was good, very good. His questions were like a whetstone for my wisdom. The more he asked, the sharper my mind became.

It delighted him when new answers arose spontaneously in his mind in response to unusual questions or to old questions from a new perspective.

Luang Por was particularly skilled in distinguishing between different kinds of questions and varying his replies accordingly. He did not feel bound to always answer questions in the terms in which they were asked. When questions were poorly framed or sprang from a lack of information or from mistaken assumptions, he would answer by separating the various

strands of the question, making necessary distinctions, and often dealing with the wrong thinking lying behind the question along the way. Some questions he threw back at the questioner with a counter-question, a method at which he was particularly adept. He would, for example, ask questioners wanting him to free them from some doubt or other whether they would believe him if he told them the answer. When they hastily assured him that they would, he would tell them that, in that case, they'd be fools, because another person's words could never set one free. He would encourage questioners to look again at their reasons for asking.

Some questions, Luang Por met with silence. In these cases, the problem was often not so much with the question itself, but with the intention of the questioner. If the questioner was caught up in a serious delusion, he was likely to interpret any answer given to him in the light of his beliefs and become even more entrenched in wrong view; it was better to add no more fuel to the fire. If the questioner was asking questions from an impure motive – perhaps to try to gauge Luang Por's attainment – Luang Por would refuse to play along. If questioners asked about topics way beyond their level of practice, Luang Por would consider the questions to be idle ones and he would refuse to add to the conceptual log pile already clogging the questioner's brain.

Luang Por had more than one type of silence. Sometimes, he would look blankly as if he hadn't heard the question; the questioner would usually realize with a jolt that they'd asked something inappropriate and move on to another topic. If the questioner missed the hint and repeated the question, he would receive a fierce look, one that would surge up into his mind more than once in the following hours and days. In a particularly dire case, Luang Por might snub the person by turning to talk to someone else. In some cases, he would say more gently that the questioner was straying a long way from home – why not ask something relevant to his present experience?

#### A NO-NONSENSE APPROACH

Every now and then, Luang Por would answer long involved questions with a single word or phrase. The brevity and the power with which he would express himself on these occasions could be shocking, and it

could also be just what was needed to illuminate the confused mind of the questioner or the excessive elaboration of his questions. As Ajahn Tiang would report, it was an effective tool to use when conversing with people puffed up with their own intelligence and views:

“He wouldn’t be bothered by questions, no matter how long and involved they might be. He wouldn’t interpret or clarify issues like other people. He’d just cut the problems off and throw them away. He’d cut them into little bits and that would be the end of them. Sometimes all he’d need was a single word or counter question ... Some people liked to go and listen when others were asking questions, but they’d be disappointed if they thought they were going to hear conventional answers.

“It wasn’t so much that he gave practical advice on how to solve problems, it was more that he showed people how to correct their thinking and attitudes ... When people came to him with doubts – they’d heard a monk say this and was it right and so on – he’d say that being aware of your lack of understanding of a matter and your desire to get an answer to it was more valuable than just adopting the opinions of another person. That’s the way that he would answer questions. His answers were immediate and spontaneous, but they would always be spot on.

“Someone once asked him about *paticcasamuppāda*, the teaching of Dependent Origination. Instead of answering in the usual way by going through all the different links, he asked the questioner whether he’d ever fallen out of a tree ... You lose your handhold, he said, and the next moment you’re lying on the ground in pain. You don’t know what went on in your mind as you fell, you didn’t have any mindfulness. It was all too quick. All you know is that you’re suffering now because you just fell out of a tree. The reason that you’re suffering like this now is called ‘specific conditionality’. When he finished, the person who asked him was laughing with pleasure at his explanation.”

On one occasion, a diligent lay meditator asked him about her practice:

“Sometimes my mind becomes very concentrated, but there tend to be moments when suddenly my head bobs up and down. It’s like I’m nodding, but I’m aware, there’s mindfulness there. What is that called?”

It's called hitting an air pocket. When you go up in a plane, that's what happens.

Although Luang Por would, on occasion, include some technical detail in his explanations, he was more likely to reply to questions by encouraging the person to look into his own mind for the answers. He saw little value in spoon-feeding information that would not be absorbed. Questioners seeking more specific advice about different meditation techniques would often be cautioned that their problem did not lie in a lack of information but in the attitude with which they were applying the information they already had. Gaining ideas could sabotage the application of any method.

The sharpness of his wit was well demonstrated with the visit of a certain Christian missionary who held the Buddhist teaching of not-self to be untenable. He was of the view that the knowledge of not-self presupposes a knower, and that that knower must be the self. The question he asked Luang Por was, 'Who knows not-self?' Luang Por's immediate counter-question was:

Who knows self?

Without getting caught in philosophical wrangling, Luang Por was asserting that, if knowledge of not-self requires something that is not not-self, i.e. self, as its knower, then the opposite must also hold true: knowledge of self presupposes something that is not-self as its knower. If the proponent of the self-view objects that the self knows itself, then the Buddhist may add that by the same token, knowing may be considered a naturally arising property of the not-self mind. Luang Por's three-word counter-question avoided the need for such a convoluted explanation. The most important point for Luang Por was that without a mind honed through meditation practice, there can be no resolution of the issue of self and not-self, only beliefs and speculation.



This chapter has sought to bring Luang Por into a clearer focus. It has dealt with how he has appeared to the people around him, and the personality traits and qualities that impressed themselves most upon them.

In particular, emphasis has been laid on those virtues that enabled him to fulfil the role of the kalyāṇamitta to his disciples. He has been seen to inspire affection, love, devotion and respect, as well as fear and awe. He has been presented as a role model, encouraging his disciples to emulate his practice. He has been shown as ‘Dhammakāmo’, one with a great passion for Dhamma, who, after being willing to put his life on the line in his own practice, exercised great patience and endurance in sharing what he had realized with others. There has been an extended account of his ability to communicate the Dhamma effectively in both formal and informal modes. All of these qualities, and others, will reappear throughout the rest of this book. But now, the focus will shift towards a more systematic presentation of Luang Por’s teaching and training of his disciples, monastic and lay, in the development of the Eightfold Path.



V  
*lifeblood*

*Not despising, not harming, restraint according to the code of monastic discipline, moderation in food, dwelling in solitude, devotion to meditation – this is the teaching of the Buddhas.*

*Dhp 185*

# *Lifeblood*

*Luang Por and the Vinaya*

*Vinaya is the lifeblood of the Dispensation.*

*Vin-a 1*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Whereas ‘Dhamma’ (Sanskrit: ‘Dharma’) is a word familiar to Buddhists of all traditions, ‘Vinaya’ is much less so. That this should be the case is worthy of remark given the central importance attached to Vinaya by the Buddha himself, as clearly demonstrated by his frequent references to the body of his teachings by the compound term ‘Dhamma-Vinaya’. At the end of his life, refusing requests to appoint a successor, the Buddha instructed his disciples:

*After my passing, the Dhamma-Vinaya which I have taught and explained to you shall be your teacher.*

*DN 16*

So what exactly does ‘Vinaya’ refer to? In essence, Vinaya refers to the Buddha’s teachings aimed at creating the optimum external conditions for the study, practice, realization and propagation of Dhamma. As the degree to which these conditions may be promoted in society at large is limited, the Vinaya is to be found most clearly in the training rules,

injunctions, procedures, protocols and conventions prescribed by the Buddha for his monastic order to live by and gathered together in the texts known collectively as the *Vinaya Pitaka*.

Etymologically, ‘Vinaya’ is derived from words meaning ‘taking out of/away from’. The practice of Vinaya seeks to lead individual practitioners away from actions and speech that will conflict with, or undermine, their practice of Dhamma and to lead monastic communities away from conflict and disharmony. Although Vinaya finds its apogee in the regulations governing monastic life, it is also found on a more general level in teachings aimed at lay Buddhists, including those explaining the path factors of Right Action, Right Speech and Right Livelihood.\*

The decision by the Buddha to place such emphasis on Vinaya may be traced back to the days following his awakening. It is said that on reviewing the path to enlightenment, the newly awakened Buddha considered it to be so demanding that he was unsure as to whether anyone else in the world could follow it to its conclusion. Although he subsequently became reassured of the existence of ‘those with little dust in their eyes’, the Buddha’s sense of the difficulty involved in transmitting the Dhamma did not leave him. He realized that his disciples would need every assistance possible, and that a monastic order could provide supportive conditions to a degree that household life, with all its demands and temptations, could rarely hope to.

In the Sangha, he sought to create a way of life that would minimize the conditions that retard progress on the path and maximize the conditions conducive to it. Members of the Sangha would not need to make compromises with the expectations and prejudices of society at large. Monastics could live within communities made safe and stable by agreed and impeccable standards of conduct, dwelling together with wise teachers and like-minded friends. In a tranquil environment, free of the daily struggle for subsistence, monks could learn how to transcend

\*The terms ‘householder Vinaya’ (*agārikavinaya*) and ‘lay Vinaya’ (*gihivinaya*) are found, respectively, in commentarial references to the ‘ten wholesome paths’ (*kusalakammopathā*) and to the responsibilities of householders detailed in the *Sīgālovāda Sutta* (DN 31).

their addiction to the sensual world and put forth undistracted effort for enlightenment.

Vinaya was the practical means by which these goals were to be achieved. In the first several years after the Buddha's enlightenment, it simply constituted a set of behavioural norms (e.g. refraining from all sexual activity, from receiving money, from eating in the evening). The commentarial texts report that the monks were all of considerable spiritual maturity and were sufficiently motivated to uphold this informal code by their devotion to the Buddha and by their own sense of right and wrong.

After twenty years had passed, however, the Sangha had grown considerably. It now contained many unenlightened members and warning signs had appeared of an impending erosion of standards. In response – and on an ad hoc basis, responding to problems as they arose – the Buddha began to introduce training rules (*sikkhāpada*) divided into different categories, which included penalties for transgressions ranging in severity from confession to expulsion. By the time of the Buddha's death, these training rules numbered 227 and were known collectively as the *Pātimokkha*. The *Pātimokkha* is the formal code of conduct for Buddhist monastics and has lain at the heart of the Vinaya ever since.

As the Sangha grew in size, the Buddha also began to elaborate upon the protocols and procedures that he wished to define the more complex communal life that was evolving. The Vinaya texts passed down to us thus include, in addition to the *Vibhaṅga* which deals with the *Pātimokkha*, a large number of supplementary allowances and prohibitions which are gathered together in the *Khandhakas*. These un-numbered injunctions are not divided into categories, and transgressions of them are almost all simply referred to as 'acts of wrongdoing' (*dukkata*). These injunctions outnumber *Pātimokkha* training rules many times over, and arguably do more to create the distinctive way of life and culture of the modern Thai forest monasteries.

Over time, a huge body of interpretations and extrapolations have accumulated around the *Khandhaka* injunctions. Most of them have become norms accepted by the Thai Forest Tradition, although there are certain variations from lineage to lineage and from teacher to teacher. From this

point on, this whole body of practices will be referred to as ‘observances’, a translation of the Thai ‘korwat’.

The following description of the training in the Vinaya undergone by the Sangha of Wat Pah Pong reflects this division between *Pātimokkha* training rules and auxiliary observances, taking each as a major section heading. It also includes an account of the *dhutaṅgas*, or ascetic practices, as a third major section, for the reason that although these ascetic practices were originally intended by the Buddha to be voluntary undertakings, a number of them have been rendered compulsory elements of the Wat Pah Pong training regime.

## II. PĀTIMOKKHA: THE CORE OF THE VINAYA

*We will be consummate in moral conduct. We will be consummate in the Pātimokkha. We will dwell restrained in accordance with the restraint of the Pātimokkha. We will be consummate in conduct and resort, seeing danger in even the slightest of faults. We will train ourselves by undertaking rightly the rules of training.*

MN 6

The Buddha listed his reasons for establishing training rules:

1. *for the excellence of the Sangha*
2. *for the comfort of the Sangha*
3. *for the suppression of the evil-minded*
4. *for the comfort of the well-mannered monks*
5. *for the restraint of the corruptions in the present*
6. *for protection against corruptions in the future*
7. *for inspiring faith in the faithless*
8. *for increasing faith in those that have faith*
9. *for the persistence of the True Dhamma*
10. *for the furtherance of Vinaya.*

*Vin recurring, AN 10.31*

The significance given by the Buddha to this formalization of Vinaya may be judged by the vital link he revealed between the *Pātimokkha* and the longevity of the teachings. Speaking as the latest of a lineage of Buddhas stretching back into the incalculable past, he said that a pattern could be discerned in the relative length of time the teachings of previous Buddhas had survived. While those of Vipassī, Sikhī and Vessabhū were relatively short-lived, he said, those of Kakusandha, Konāgamana and Kassapa lasted for a long time. The reasons for the disparity were not only that those of the second group were ‘untiring in giving abundant Dhamma teaching to disciples’ but also because ‘the training rules for disciples were indicated and the *Pātimokkha* was appointed.’ The Buddha summarized this observation with a simile: the teachings were preserved by these measures in the same way that flower petals threaded onto a length of cotton twine could be prevented from blowing away in the wind.

In Theravada Buddhist cultures, the Sangha has been venerated as the model Buddhist community designed by the Buddha himself and revered for providing moral, intellectual and spiritual leadership to society since its inception. Whereas the Buddhist world has never lacked a core of exemplary and inspiring lay practitioners, it has always been the prevailing view that most of those who have realized the higher fruits of the Buddhist training have done so as monastics. Being seen as the institution in which the vast majority of the most renowned Buddhist scholars and practitioners throughout history have chosen to spend their life, the Sangha retains a great prestige.

The Vinaya has always been the defining feature of Sangha life, the visible embodiment of its guiding ideals, and the guarantor of its stability and integrity through the ages. In essence, entering the monastic order has meant committing oneself to the study and practice of Dhamma within the framework of the Vinaya.

At least, that has been the ideal. It is true that the inseparability of Dhamma and Vinaya – most simply of the inner and the outer elements of the Buddha’s path of liberation – has always been one of the fundamental tenets of Theravada Buddhism. Nevertheless, in practice, the degree to which that relationship has been maintained in monastic communities over the centuries has fluctuated widely. The Bhikkhu Sangha is probably

the oldest surviving institution in the world today, and inevitably, golden ages have alternated with periods of decline. In Thailand, it was in the early twentieth century, with the appearance of the lineage founded by Luang Pu Mun, that the principle of Dhamma-Vinaya as a single integrated entity was put back at the very nub of monastic training. And it was this approach to the path of practice that so inspired Luang Por Chah when he paid his respects to Luang Pu Mun in early 1948.

It was an approach that signalled a radical departure from the prevailing norm in Isan at the time. When Luang Por was growing up, entering the Sangha in rural Northeast Thailand did not usually entail either a commitment to striving for enlightenment or even an adherence to the Vinaya. Monastic life in a village monastery was much more likely to entail embarking on a simple, virtuous existence consisting of a superficial study of the texts, combined with various priestly duties. Luang Por became a monk in his local monastery because there was no obvious alternative, and, for all of its faults, he would have considered that, for a person of his interests and aspirations, it was the most obvious place for him to be.

It has always been taken for granted in Buddhist cultures that a young man who possesses a strong spiritual vocation, and who is free of ties and responsibilities, will enter the Sangha. By leaving the household life, he will gain the opportunity to make a wholehearted commitment to the study and practice of the Buddha's teachings. If someone is free of family responsibilities, then why, the argument goes, would they not choose to live in the way that the Buddha himself recommended? Why live as a householder and handicap oneself unnecessarily? Ordination was Luang Por's first declaration of intent on his path to liberation.

Unsurprisingly, his aspirations could not be satisfied with life in a village monastery for long. Becoming a *tudong* monk at the beginning of 1947 was in many ways his true Going Forth; it was a departure by which he left behind forever a monastic system in which the Vinaya was only cursorily upheld and formal meditation a peripheral activity at best. Significantly, his wish upon leaving was not only to find a master of meditation, but also one who could instruct him in the Vinaya. Already, he saw the two linked together 'like the back and palm of his hand'. He recognized from

the beginning of his quest that without the clear-cut boundaries provided by the Vinaya, sensual desires might well have swept him off the path altogether.

Later, when he began his own monastic community, the Vinaya was central to Luang Por's vision. He saw it as playing a vital role on both the communal and the individual levels. Communitarily, a scrupulous regard for the Vinaya helped to maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect, harmony and camaraderie. On the individual level, the practice of restraint within the boundaries of the Vinaya cultivated the inner virtue of *sīla* which together with the training of the heart (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) constituted the Buddha's path to awakening.

The individual dimension was key. Monks were expected to be able to constantly call training rules to mind in relevant situations, thus systematically, over time, creating new skilful habits of conduct and speech. Precise and detailed instructions for dealing with the material world grounded monks in the present moment. The recollection of precepts at the moment when the intention to transgress had arisen allowed them to stop, awaken to the significance of their intentions and refrain from unwise actions. It wasn't easy. But for those who persisted, practising in this way freed their mind from guilt, anxiety and regret, and gave them the sense of well-being and self-respect that formed the indispensable foundation for the development of *samādhi* and *paññā*. In a passage from the Parivāra:

*Discipline is for the sake of restraint, restraint for the sake of freedom from remorse, freedom from remorse for the sake of joy, joy for the sake of rapture, rapture for the sake of tranquillity, tranquillity for the sake of pleasure, pleasure for the sake of concentration, concentration for the sake of knowledge and vision of things as they are, knowledge and vision of things as they are for the sake of disenchantment, disenchantment for the sake of release, release for the sake of knowledge and vision of release, knowledge and vision of release for the sake of final Nibbāna through non-clinging.*

*Vin Pv 12.2*

Luang Por believed that, as members of the Sangha, it was a monk's duty to give great respect to the practice of the Vinaya. Disrespect towards it meant disrespect towards the Buddha himself, its creator. And if a monk treated the Buddha with disrespect, then how could he hope to progress in Dhamma?

#### LUANG POR SPEAKS ABOUT THE VINAYA

Our practice here has its foundation in the Vinaya, together with the ascetic practices and the practice of meditation. Being mindful, being restrained within the various monastic regulations, up to and including the 227 rules in the *Pāṭimokkha*, is of immense value. It makes life simple and peaceful: we don't have to be anxious about how we should behave. We're free of worry and instead have a peaceful life governed by mindfulness.

The Vinaya enables us to live together in unity; the community runs smoothly. Outwardly everyone looks and acts in the same way. The Vinaya and morality are a firm stairway leading to profound levels of concentration and wisdom. By proper use of the Vinaya and the ascetic practices, we make our lives simple and limit our possessions. Here we have the complete practice of the Buddha: refrain from evil and do good, live simply keeping to basic needs, purify the mind. In other words, be watchful of your mind and body in all postures: sitting, standing, walking or lying down – know yourself.



Remember: the essence of the Vinaya is watching intention, examining the mind.



The practitioner must have mindfulness, and must be reflective. In your speech and in all your physical actions – touching things, picking them up or whatever – you should first be thoroughly clear about what you are doing and why. Mistakes occur when

your mindfulness is weak, or when you are not paying attention to what you are doing.



Although it can feel as if the Vinaya is harassing you, it has immense benefit. You should know all the training rules. If there are any that you don't know about, then find out from someone who does.



A monk who doesn't keep the Vinaya and who doesn't meditate can't live together with one who does – their paths will diverge.



Study [the training rules] until you understand them, reflect on what you've learned and then memorize it. Every now and again, come and pay respects to the teacher and clear up your doubts. He will explain the finer points. Keep studying until you truly understand the Vinaya.



Take care of the rules as a gardener takes care of trees: without discriminating between big and small.



You have to be meticulous with the Vinaya, and if you don't practise it in a heartfelt way, then you will meet difficulties. Those who are restrained within the bounds of the Vinaya feel as if nothing could endanger them, but nevertheless, they are constantly on their guard.

## DOUBTS

As a young monk, Luang Por developed a keen interest in the Vinaya. He soon graduated from studying the basic textbooks to the *Pubbasikkhāvāṇṇanā*, a nineteenth-century compendium of dense Sri Lankan commentaries that was considered the main resource for serious Vinaya

practitioners.\* He made copious notes and kept a notebook filled with the factors determining transgressions of every rule in his shoulder bag. In later days, speaking of the energy and dedication he brought to his Vinaya studies, he recalled how he would sometimes pick up his books at six in the evening and not put them down until the following dawn when it was time to prepare for the daily alms-round. His understanding of the Vinaya deepened during his wandering years as he began to meet other monks committed to living by the training rules and was able to engage them in discussion about more abstruse passages in the texts.

However, on embarking upon a study of Ven. Buddhaghosa's great fifth-century CE work *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*) – the pre-eminent commentarial text of Theravada Buddhism – Luang Por experienced a crisis of faith. In poring over the section of the book dealing with morality, it seemed to him that the huge number of minor observances listed in the text, made the Vinaya, if taken in its entirety, a system too complex to live by. To Luang Por, this was a devastating conclusion; it struck at the very core of his vocation. Years later he recalled wryly, 'I thought my head would explode.'

To Luang Por's mind, devotion to the Buddha's Vinaya followed naturally from devotion to his Dhamma. The two were inseparable. Luang Por wanted to keep every rule, and keep every rule perfectly. But now it seemed that no matter how much effort he put forth, however sincere he might be, that was not possible.

A simple conviction kept the worst of the doubts at bay: the Buddha, the greatest of teachers, was a pragmatist. He would never have prescribed standards of behaviour impossible for his disciples to live by. Luang Por felt stuck – as if he'd come to a dead end – and yet he believed there was a way out, and he was determined to find it. It was for this reason that when he went to pay respects to Luang Pu Mun, the first questions he chose to ask were not about meditation, but about the Vinaya:

\*This book, published in 1860, was the work of Phra Amarabhirakkhita, one of the first generation of Dhammayut reformer monks.

I said, ‘Venerable Ajahn, what should I do? I’m new to the practice and I don’t know how to proceed. I have a lot of doubts. I still don’t have a firm foundation.’

He said, ‘What is the problem?’

‘Well, while I was trying to find a way forward in the practice I started to read *The Path of Purification*. It made me feel that it’s all beyond me, that no human being has the capacity to practice in that way. It’s just too difficult; it’s impossible to be mindful of every single one of those rules.’

And Luang Pu Mun said to me, ‘It’s true that there are a lot of observances; but in essence, there are few. If you were to try to keep every single training rule mentioned in that book it would certainly be a difficult task. But actually, the *Exposition on Sīla* is just that – an exposition, one that describes the workings of the human mind. Through training your mind to have a wise shame (*hiri*) and fear of consequences (*ottappa*), you will be naturally possessed of restraint and care with regard to the training rules. As a result, your desires will be reduced and your mindfulness will be stronger. Whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down you’ll be intent on maintaining a complete and constant mindfulness. Vigilance will appear in your mind.’

This approach to the Vinaya was a revelation to Luang Por. It was not, he understood Luang Pu Mun to be saying, that you were to disregard the training rules in favour of a more general development of awareness, but that mindfulness grounded in a thorough knowledge of the training rules must be based upon the correct attitude towards them.

It was a theme that Luang Por was to emphasize repeatedly in his own teachings. As was Luang Pu Mun’s injunction:

“Whatever comes up that you are unsure about – stop. If there’s no alertness in your mind, then don’t do it, don’t say it. For instance, you wonder, ‘Is this an offence or not?’ As long you still don’t know whether it is or not, then don’t act upon that intention, don’t speak with it, don’t transgress.”

Luang Pu Mun advised Luang Por that in times of doubt it was correct to seek out teachers and listen to what they had to say. Nevertheless, he should bear in mind that the words of others could never truly bring those doubts to an end. Every unskilful action is prompted by an unskilful intention; unless an inner restraint is developed, doubts about conduct will never go away. The key point was, he said, ‘whether the mind fully accepts the wrongness of wrong actions and the rightness of right actions.’

Luang Por summarized the teaching that he received from Luang Pu Mun as follows:

This teaching he gave me was an important one: it’s not that you can ‘raksa’ every single training rule. It’s enough to ‘raksa’ your mind.\*

This did not mean that Luang Por ascribed to the view that practising mindfulness was a sufficient practice in itself. When informed of the view that a mindful monk would be naturally virtuous, he replied:

That’s true but it’s not right. It’s right but it’s not true.

In other words, it was putting the cart before the ox. Whereas it may be true that unshakeable mindfulness protects a monk from unskilful intentions, it is also the case that very few monks possess that level of mindfulness. The pressing question is how that protective mindfulness is to be cultivated in the first place. Luang Por held that the recollection of training rules was one of the most important means of cultivating mindfulness laid down by the Buddha himself.

In the *Ānguttara Nikāya* \*\*, the Buddha gives a list of eight criteria that may be used to decide whether or not a teaching is in harmony with the Dhamma-Vinaya. Luang Por had adopted this list in his own studies, and the inspiration he found in the words of Luang Pu Mun was strengthened

\*The Thai verb ‘raksa’ has been retained here to keep the play on words. ‘Raksa’ can mean both ‘to keep’ (as in, ‘to keep precepts’ or ‘to keep one’s word’) and to ‘care for’ or ‘protect’.

\*\*AN 8.53

even further with the recognition that they were completely congruent with the eight factors:

As I sat there listening I saw that it agreed with the teaching of the eight criteria for deciding what is truly the teaching of the Buddha.

Whatever teaching does not lead to the accumulation of defilements, or the binding to suffering, but leads to detachment from craving, fewness of wishes, contentment, seclusion, putting forth effort, being easy to support – that teaching is the true teaching of the Buddha.

#### HIRI AND OTTAPPA: THE TWO GUARDIANS OF THE WORLD

*Hiri* and *ottappa* were two virtues that Luang Pu Mun singled out as fundamental to growth in Dhamma-Vinaya. Of the various renderings of these words in English, ‘shame’ and ‘fear’ are the most common, while more recent attempts have included ‘conscience’ and ‘care’. The lack of consensus amongst translators points to the difficulty in finding words for these qualities free of Judeo-Christian connotations alien to their original meaning. Perhaps the distinguishing feature of these two terms is that they involve no idea of a ‘shameful’ or ‘bad’ self, only of ‘shameful’ or ‘bad’ actions. *Hiri* and *ottappa* may be seen as emotions that arise naturally when unwise actions are seen in their true light.

In this book, ‘*hiri*’ is rendered as ‘wise shame’ and ‘*ottappa*’ as ‘wise fear of consequences’. The prefix ‘wise’ is intended to emphasize that these two virtues are positive emotions that may be cultivated by means of wise consideration (*yoniso manasikāra*). Regularly recollecting one’s goals and aspirations, one’s status and responsibilities, enables the mind to recognize any actions and speech in conflict with them, resulting in a shrinking away from those actions (the texts compare it to a feather shrinking away from a fire). This is called ‘wise shame’. Regularly recollecting the consequences of actions in light of the law of *kamma* results in a rational fear of unwholesome actions: ‘wise fear of consequences’.

Wise shame, wise fear of consequences – that’s all you need. When you’re about to do something, and you’re not sure whether

it's right or wrong, wise shame arises and you don't do it. It doesn't matter whether, in fact, it is right or wrong, you desist for the time being. Whatever you're uncertain about, don't do it, don't say it. Check with the teacher first.

This is the common ground of all the Vinaya rules: cultivating wise shame and wise fear of consequences with regard to all bad kamma. It reaches the point that the intention to kill a mosquito feels the same as the thought to kill a human being.

If a mosquito bites you, and you scratch the itch and unintentionally kill the mosquito, then there's no kamma involved. But its death reminds you to be more mindful in future. And not to be heedless – you have to add that point. You look after the Vinaya at this one point of wise shame and wise fear of consequences, and it will encompass every training rule. Just make sure you have wise shame and wise fear of consequences ... and that's the Dhamma.

#### NO MORE WILL TO TRANSGRESS

On one of the very rare occasions that Luang Por referred to his own spiritual attainments, he told the Sangha at Wat Pah Pong that after many years of application, his own study of the Vinaya had ended with the realization that the volitions necessary for transgression of training rules were no longer present within him. It was impossible for him to act in an unwholesome manner. He repeated the insight that he had gained from his time with Luang Pu Mun:

This is an important point: the only true conclusion to the study of the Vinaya comes from within.

Luang Por's declaration that the intention to transgress was no longer present in his mind makes immediate sense if all the Vinaya rules were concerned with curbing the expression of unwholesome impulses. But a number of training rules proscribe acts that are not inherently immoral – eating after midday is an obvious example. Why then, would a monk's inner purity inevitably result in him scrupulously adhering to training rules not directly related to the arising of greed, hatred and delusion in

his mind? It is a point that illuminates the understanding of the Vinaya found in Luang Por and his fellow teachers of the Thai Forest Tradition.

Their view is based upon the fact that the Vinaya has been passed down from the Buddha himself. One who requests entry into the Sangha applies for permission to live his life according to the Buddha's Vinaya. In effect, through faith in the Buddha's wisdom, without picking and choosing, he is promising to respect all of the rules constituting the Vinaya. Transgressing a training rule may then be seen as renegeing on a promise, and it is this volition to betray a commitment that no longer arises in the enlightened monk's mind.

Secondly, in a seminal passage in the Suttas\*, Ven. Mahā Kassapa declines the Buddha's invitation to relax his ascetic practices in his old age. He explains to the Buddha that he wishes to be a good example to younger monks and to future generations. It was this same motivation that guided the great arahants in their scrupulous adherence to the training rules.

The position that precepts can be abandoned after enlightenment is one which has been rejected by all the great masters of the Theravada tradition. They have taken pains to avoid sending the message that one who has attained a certain level of insight is now beyond the training rules. The danger they have seen in the view that rules are only for those that need to keep them is that it would undermine the harmony of the Sangha produced by a common practice of the rules. It might easily lead to corrupt or deluded monks claiming exceptions to group standards of behaviour based upon false attainments. With over-estimation of attainments having always posed a challenge to meditating communities, a system in which no monk may claim an exemption to the training rules provides safety to all.\*\* Those monks who have mistakenly believed themselves to have reached a level of enlightenment are thereby protected from creating bad kamma. Their students are prevented from facilitating such behaviour through faith in their teacher and thus creating bad kamma themselves.

\*SN 16.5

\*\*However, there are non-offense clauses, for example, in cases of sickness or insanity.

Luang Por led by example. He sought to set the tone in the monastery by maintaining an impeccable standard of conduct. On every full moon and dark moon day, the Sangha of Wat Pah Pong gathered together for its most important recurring ritual: the recitation, by one of its members, of the 227 *Pāṭimokkha* rules. Before entering the Uposatha Hall, the monks were required to split into pairs to confess to their partner offences against the Vinaya they might have committed during the previous fifteen days. Only thus purified might they attend the recitation. Luang Por, although free of transgressions, would always perform the ritual. After the recitation, he would give an exhortation to the Sangha that would emphasize the role of moral conduct in the path to enlightenment.

#### CAGING THE TIGER

To newly ordained monks at Wat Pah Pong, the Vinaya could feel like a heavy burden. Some said they felt as if they could scarcely lift a finger without breaking some training rule or other. Monks could feel intimidated by the sheer number of the rules; there seemed to be so many to bear in mind at every moment. Compounding the discomfort caused by the constrictions of their new life, few monks were completely free of odd moments of regret for old habits and pleasures. Luang Por would tell his disciples to be patient, that the discomfort was a natural reaction. Restraining themselves within the boundaries of the Vinaya, he said, was like caging a tiger. Initially, the caged tiger rages at the bars, but it gradually gets used to its confinement and accepts the situation. The tiger, he said, was like the defilements:

It's not your mind that is suffering; it's the defilements that are agitated. Be patient.

On another occasion, he compared defilements and conceited views to an infection in a wound, and the Vinaya as like an instrument that probes the wound (often painfully) to clean out the foreign matter in order that healing may take place.

## WISE USE

At Wat Pah Pong, conducting oneself within the boundaries established by the training rules was taught as a means to promote mindfulness and social harmony. But, like any tool, there was always the possibility that it could be used unskilfully and create more harm than good. The biggest danger in emphasizing the Vinaya was that it could be grasped at as an end in itself. Being ‘strict’ could become a fetish, and a cause of spiritual pride. Luang Por cautioned the monks:

The Vinaya will cause you all kinds of distress if you don’t know how to use it properly.

He would frequently remind the monks that they must use mindfulness and wisdom to protect their practice of the Vinaya from conceit and the craving for identity. He warned them about holding tenaciously to particular interpretations of training rules or of using Vinaya practice as a means to exalt oneself and denigrate others:

The Vinaya is a tool to use for your own cultivation. It’s not a weapon to be used to criticize or find fault with others. No one can do your practice for you, and neither can you do theirs for them. Just be mindful of your own conduct.

He would tell monks to give 90% of their attention to their own conduct and only 10% to others. Getting angry with monks who were not respecting training rules was to miss the point of the Vinaya altogether. Obsessive doubts and anxiety about transgressions were other traps to avoid. With so many training rules – and with such a large number of them complicated by mitigating and aggravating factors – it was unsurprising that monks often fell prey to doubts about the integrity of their Vinaya practice. If a monk was not diligent in his study or did not refer doubts to a knowledgeable elder, there was always room for uncertainty. If the monk was of a worrying disposition, he would suffer considerably.

Sometimes a craving for purity led to an obsession with perceived impurity. Every now and again, a monk would adopt unrealistically strict interpretations of the Vinaya rules and drive himself to distraction at his inability to keep to them. He might even decide to give up the training

altogether, fearful of the bad kamma created by living the monks' life badly. In Luang Por's discourses on the Vinaya, a certain hapless monk called Dam often played a cautionary role:

Some monks read the commentarial texts and start thinking they're committing offences every minute of the day. This is a sign of a lack of wisdom. I've spoken to you before about Mr Dam from Bahn Tung who was a monk here for three years. While he was practising walking meditation, the thought would come up in his mind that he'd committed an offence. He'd go over to a monk practising walking meditation nearby and ask if he could formally confess the offence. Then he'd go back to his own walking path, walk a few steps more, and then think, 'Oh no! That's an offence too!' He'd spend his whole time, going back and forth, confessing offences to this monk and that. It started to drive him crazy ... Other monks avoided him. The more he studied the Vinaya, the worse he got; his mind was in turmoil, doubting every possible aspect of the Vinaya. Three years in robes and he had nothing to show for it, other than a mind full of doubts.

Mr Dam, crippled by his doubts, eventually left the Sangha. Luang Por would point out that, in such cases, disrobing was the predictable result of monks believing in the stories they created from their doubts.

## INTENTION

Intention<sup>\*</sup> is the key determining factor in almost all of the offences listed in the Vinaya. But given that in times of stress, awareness of intention is usually impaired, even the most upright monk could be assailed by doubts about his actions after the fact. Luang Por would counsel monks tormented in this way to know doubt as doubt, know it as a conditioned mental state, understand its nature. If the doubt persists, and if the Vinaya teachers agree that there are good grounds for it, then he should confess the offence.

In certain cases of 'criminal' neglect, intention is not the decisive factor. A monk who inadvertently drinks alcohol, for instance, is deemed at fault

<sup>\*</sup>Pali: *cetanā*. Also commonly translated as 'volition' and occasionally as 'urge'.

for not paying sufficient attention to the fluid he has been offered before drinking it. A lack of respect may also be decisive. Luang Por once gave an example of a shameless monk who eats something believing the time to be after the twelve o'clock noon limit, only to discover that, in fact, it is not yet noon. Has he committed an offence? Although he has not committed the offence of 'eating at the wrong time', Luang Por explained that he is considered to have committed a lesser offence of wrongdoing:

The offence lies in losing track of the time, not reflecting thoroughly, being heedless and unrestrained.

For the diligent monk, respect for the rules and commitment to the training should always take precedence over comfort and ease. Luang Por gave the example of a monk, far from the monastery, who is tempted by an offering of semi-raw fish – an Isan delicacy:

You're on tudong, and during alms-round a donor puts some fish wrapped in leaves in your bowl. It's all you've got to eat with the rice. But when you sit down to eat and open up the wrapping, it turns out that the fish is virtually uncooked, and so you put it aside.\* You'd rather eat plain rice. You don't dare to transgress; the mind sees [the fault]. When you reach this level, keeping the Vinaya becomes easier.

Luang Por related to his disciples how he'd dealt with his own crisis of faith as a young monk:

When I saw the faults in my behaviour, in my practice, in my teachers, in everything, I was so upset I almost disrobed. I felt hot, I couldn't sleep. It was really bad kamma. The kamma lay in the doubting speculation. The more I got caught up in the doubts, the more I meditated, the more effort I put forth. I kept working away at whatever point my mind was stuck on. As a result, wisdom arose and changes steadily occurred.

Formerly, I hadn't known anything about offences of wrongdoing, wasn't interested in any of that. But when I really understood

\* Consuming raw meat or fish is prohibited.

Dhamma and held to this way of practice, then offences of wrong-doing became, to me, like expulsion offences.

## VINAYA INSTRUCTION

Formal instruction in the Vinaya at Wat Pah Pong was intensified in the three-month Rains Retreat. Every evening, after the period of chanting and meditation, Luang Por would read from, and comment upon, the *Pubbasikkhāvāṇṇanā*.

I still take the *Pubbasikkhā* as my reference in training the monks and novices. I read it out to the Sangha for many years. In those days, I'd sit on the Dhamma seat and teach until at least eleven or twelve o'clock at night; some nights until one or two in the morning. The monks were interested, and it was a training in listening and then taking away what you'd heard to study and reflect upon it. If you just listen, I don't think you can understand in depth. After you've listened, then you have to go through the points and analyse them until you understand.

The monks and novices may well have been interested in the Vinaya, but the late night sessions could be gruelling, especially at the end of a long day. In time-hallowed fashion, Luang Por's explanations of the rules would be interspersed with colourful anecdotes, many of them humorous, to keep his audience alert.

Many of the monks and novices also had their own copies of the first of the three-volume *Vinaya Mukha* commentary, composed by the Supreme Patriarch Phra Vajiranavarorasa in 1913. It provided a much more stream-lined presentation of the Vinaya and formed a major element of the Nak Tam Dhamma exams curriculum. But although the *Vinaya Mukha* helped to provide a basic grasp of the Vinaya, Luang Por encouraged study of the *Pubbasikkhā*. On one occasion, he advised:

The best thing is to have your own copy and to study the Vinaya by yourself in your kuti. When you have some free time, look at the text and keep considering the meaning. Then come and listen to the explanations and reflect on them at length. When

you don't understand something, come and ask the teacher and he will give you advice.

Luang Por explained that the Vinaya consists of a complex system of conventions to be memorized, contemplated and then applied with mindfulness and wisdom. Proficiency in use of the training rules was to be gained through consistent practice and by learning from experience. The Vinaya did not provide a cut-and-dried instruction manual for a monk's daily life.

It's extremely subtle and you won't be able to draw upon your memory of the rules quickly enough. There's so much detail to learn that it takes a long time of in-depth study with the teacher and steady practice.

Conforming to training rules and monastic observances led to a reduction in the time that might otherwise have been consumed by petty matters, and to increased efficiency in conducting the affairs of the Sangha. This was especially true when they were accompanied by a strong common dedication to practice.

A large number of monks doesn't have to lead to sloppiness and disorder. It's like a millipede. A millipede has lots of legs and looks awkward, as if the legs should get all snarled up. But in fact, because there is a rhythm and order to its movements, the millipede walks around without difficulties. It's the same in Buddhism. If you practise like true disciples of the Buddha, it's easy. That means practising well, practising directly, practising in order to be free of suffering, practising with integrity. Then if there are hundreds of monks, or even thousands – no matter how many there are – it doesn't matter, because they all form into one harmonious whole.

Recollection of the Vinaya gave them the opportunity to become aware of old habitual reactions and worldly desires, and to let them go. In many cases, the role of the Vinaya was to simplify and clarify choices by providing boundaries for action. These boundaries were to stay firm, even when the motivations pressing for them to be ignored were wholesome ones. Monks were not taught to repress their compassion in favour of

rules and regulations, only that they should learn how to express that compassion within the boundaries provided by the Vinaya.

## TESTING

Luang Por's senior disciples were fond of reminiscing about the ways in which he would use the Vinaya rules to test their alertness. While out walking in the middle of the day, for instance, he would often place a folded bathing cloth on his head for protection against the sun. The Vinaya allows a monk to cover his head only if his teacher is already doing so, and seeing Luang Por covering his head, other monks would gratefully follow suit. On some occasions, after a certain time had elapsed, Luang Por would discreetly remove the cloth from his head and after a while look behind to see if the other monks had done likewise. Those who had not would be admonished for daydreaming or, at the very least, receive one of his famous withering stares.

## THE PRACTICE OF THE VINAYA

The rules of the *Pātimokkha* are treated in the *Vibhaṅga* in great, sometimes exhaustive detail. The exposition of each rule includes a word-by-word analysis and a number of leading cases. Nevertheless, certain grey areas remain, for which there can be no unchallengeable interpretations. In certain cases, the spirit rather than the letter of the training rule prevails. For example, the rule prohibiting the consumption of alcohol is extended to cover other addictive drugs. In cases where the explanation of a rule contains ambiguous words or phrases, or leaves open possible loopholes, monastic groups usually come to their own agreements on correct practice. Luang Por was noted for establishing conventions at Wat Pah Pong aimed at promoting mindfulness rather than convenience. The 'Great Standards' requires monks to decide on the suitability of any new item not covered in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* by deciding whether it is most akin to the things that the Buddha prohibited or to the things that he permitted. Based on this criterion, driving a car, for example, is prohibited, while travelling by plane is permitted.

## TAKING WHAT IS NOT GIVEN

There are four expulsion offences (*pārājika*) listed in the *Pātimokkha*.<sup>\*</sup> A monk who commits any one of them loses his monkhood the moment he does so and cannot rejoin the Sangha at a later date.

*It is just as a man, head cut off, cannot survive without it ... a withered leaf removed from its stem can never become green ... a solid block of stone broken in two cannot be returned to oneness ... a sugar palm tree cut off at the crown is incapable of further growth.*

*Vin Mv 1.65*

A dedicated monk who begins to suspect that he might have committed an expulsion offence suffers intensely. ‘Am I really still a monk?’ is one of the most stressful thoughts that a monk may have to endure. The fourth expulsion offence, which involves lying about one’s spiritual attainments, gives monks most grounds for doubt. But the second *pārājika*, ‘taking what is not given’, may also keep a monk awake at night.

In this rule, the value of the appropriated object affects the severity of the offence. If the object is trifling – worth less than one ‘*pāda*’ – the text awards a lesser offence, falling short of expulsion. But, in today’s world, how may the value of one *pāda* be estimated? Although a commentarial text defines a *pāda* by its weight in gold, simply calculating the current value of the same weight of gold (as many monastic communities do) requires ignoring the role gold now plays in the international economic system. Today’s market-based value is both inflated and variable. Of the leading cases in the texts in which monks were found guilty of stealing, a *pāda* seems to be quite a small amount of money, but no exact standard can be deduced from the examples. If a monk has taken anything at all that does not belong to him, the gnawing doubt that accompanies his remorse, is whether or not the item taken merits expulsion.

Luang Por dealt with this ambiguity by adopting the position of the *Pubbasikkhā*, which simply translates the ancient Indian *pāda* as the Thai baht (they are, in fact, the same word). When the *Pubbasikkhā* was first

<sup>\*</sup>In brief, these are: sexual intercourse; theft; taking human life; and falsely claiming spiritual attainment.

published in the mid-nineteenth century, a baht could buy a cow, and thus the translation raised the bar for an expulsion offence very high. But by the mid-1950s, a baht had lost much of its value and was worth less and less as time went on. In opting for this convention, Luang Por effectively established a ‘zero tolerance’ approach to dishonesty. By doing so, it might be objected that he was distorting the Vinaya by abolishing *de facto* the lesser offence of petty theft.

Luang Por’s position was that a monk prepared to steal even the most trifling of items had no place in his monastery. Theft of a minor item would lead to expulsion from Wat Pah Pong, not necessarily from the Sangha. If a monk were to commit a theft of a small item and be sure in his mind that he had not committed a pārājika offence, he could simply leave the monastery and go elsewhere. He was the owner of his kamma. Luang Por did not insist that his interpretation was the only correct one, but that it was the standard of honesty that he expected his disciples to live by.

As a training of the mind, this interpretation of the rule encouraged monks to give a great deal of care and attention to their dealings with the material world. They knew that a moment of heedlessness might mean hours or days of mental agitation. A monk taking a box of matches from the altar, or even a single match, was expected to inform another monk before doing so. As a secondary benefit, the slight embarrassment of having to inform another of one’s smallest acts of consumption did much to nourish the spirit of frugality in the monastery.

## OFFERING

The fortieth training rule in the ‘Confession’ (*Pācittiya*) section of the *Pātimokkha* deals with the way in which a monk may receive food and medicines. It stipulates that he must accept such offerings either directly into his hands, into a vessel or onto a cloth that he is holding. For the offering to be deemed legitimate, the donor must be within arms-length of the monk.

But grey areas remain. What is the correct procedure, for instance, if a monk touches food in the mistaken belief that it has already been offered

to another monk? On realizing his error, may he ask a layperson to formally offer the food and make good his error? Or is this food now ‘unallowable’? On such matters the text is silent. At Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por established a regulation that a thoughtless monk who touched a vessel containing un-offered food was forbidden from eating any of its contents. Once, however, the vessel had been properly offered, the rest of the Sangha could partake. If the monk repositioned or merely lifted the vessel from where it had been placed, then no monk could partake of the food. This ruling expressed a common theme: given an ambiguity in the text, Luang Por would establish a convention that punished heedlessness and promoted mindfulness.

As Luang Por became more famous, weekends would often see people from the local town of Warin, from the city of Ubon and even from other parts of Thailand come to offer food for the Sangha’s daily meal. But in the early years of Wat Pah Pong, when the village communities supporting the monastery were poor and Luang Por was still relatively unknown, the diet was austere. Nevertheless, every now and again, a lay donor from the city would arrive with a big pot of curry and other choice items of city food. For the Sangha, it was a treat. On one notorious occasion, after a monk picked up a big pot of curry mistakenly assuming it to have already been offered, Luang Por had the pot sent straight to the novices and nuns. For the monks, it was a practical teaching on the consequences of heedlessness that they did not soon forget.

#### (NOT) RELATING TO WOMEN

Given that celibacy is one of the defining features of Buddhist monasticism, it is unsurprising that sexual misconduct accounts for some of the most serious transgressions against the monastic code. The Vinaya outlaws every imaginable kind of sexual activity, and the texts go into remarkably candid (even comic) detail in their efforts to clarify the extent of the prohibitions. Sexual continence is not seen as an end in itself, however, but as an important element of the training. Through abstaining from all overt expression of sexual desire, monastics give themselves the opportunity to isolate sensual craving as a conditioned mental phe-

nomenon, to recognize its inherent unsatisfactoriness and to discover the means of freeing themselves from its dominion.

Monastic sex scandals make the front page of Thai newspapers. In Buddhist lay communities, nothing excites gossip as readily; nothing destroys faith in a monastery so easily. At the same time, the good name of the Sangha being very much tied to its sincere commitment to renunciation of worldly pleasures, nothing enhances the reputation of a monastery as surely as an absence of such scandals. Luang Por was well aware that a mendicant order can only flourish when it commands the goodwill and respect of the lay community, and he went to great lengths to prevent any kind of sexual impropriety from occurring in his monastery. He was remarkably successful. Now in its seventh decade, Wat Pah Pong has remained untainted by even the rumours of scandal.

Luang Por's method was a simple one: as far as possible, he prevented any social contact between junior monks and nuns or laywomen. The separation between monks and nuns at Wat Pah Pong was absolute – they might as well have lived in separate worlds. His logic was that most serious transgressions occur when a monk allows minor transgressions to become habit and to acquire a feeling of normalcy. Gradually, the point at which the monk begins to feel that he is acting inappropriately recedes. The slippery slope leading to overt sexual misconduct opens up before him. Don't allow the more innocent exchanges to take place, Luang Por reasoned, and you cut off the problem at its root.

Certainly, Luang Por's most resolute and uncompromising side came to the fore in his attitude towards this area of the training. He felt that, in his own personal struggle with sexual desire, it was his devotion to the Vinaya that kept him in robes and allowed him the space in which to develop the meditational prowess and insight that allowed him to eventually transcend it. Nothing, Luang Por had observed over the years, could pull a young man out of the monkhood as easily as sexual desire, and for this reason, he would allow nothing to unnecessarily provoke it. Talking to young monks, he would echo the Buddha's words to Ven. Ānanda:

Cut it off right at the start. Don't see them. If it's necessary to see them, then don't talk to them. But what do you do if you have to talk to them? Be very mindful. That is the way to practice towards women. All it needs is for your eyes to meet hers, and that's it – you can be utterly smitten for a month or two months, perhaps until you die.

'Dying' here meant to disrobe. Protecting one's monkhood was considered a life or death struggle. The tone of these admonitions was often fierce, but leavened with a wry humour when Luang Por would skewer the most embarrassing thoughts that could pop up in a lustful mind:

And when she's gotten up from her seat, and you can even be aching to go over there and touch the seat she's been sitting on – that's what the Buddha called craving.

To anyone unfamiliar with the struggles of a monastic life, Luang Por's approach might seem draconian. But it was based on an appreciation of how an infirm mind can dwell on the smallest exciting memory. Losing mindfulness in conversation with a young woman could deal a heavy blow to a monk's meditation.

She's gone, and you can still see her face. It's a lingering vision. You sit alone with her, and she tells you all about herself; and three years later, you can still hear her words in your ears, in your heart. It's a disaster. Don't socialize with women. It's dangerous.

Luang Por himself provided an impeccable example. He would never be alone with a woman under any circumstance. He received guests below his kuti in an area open to the central part of the monastery on three sides. He would only speak to a woman with at least one monk, novice or layman present as a companion. This restraint was not solely due to his respect for the Vinaya and the wish to be a good example to his students. Although Luang Por's own actions, speech and mind might be beyond reproach, he could not assume the same for every person that came to see him. In his position, it was imperative that he protect himself from giving anyone prejudiced against him the slightest grounds for slander or innuendo.

One of the policies that distinguished Wat Pah Pong from most other monasteries in Thailand was Luang Por's refusal to sanction any kind of fund-raising scheme. He believed that if the Sangha practised well, any funds genuinely needed by the monastery would appear by themselves in due course. Appealing for donations was both unnecessary and unbecoming.

He would often say that he disagreed with the common view that the word '*bhikkhu*' was derived from 'beggar'. Monks should never perceive themselves as beggars, he said, because if they do, it will feel natural to make requests. Luang Por would point out that the Vinaya does not allow healthy monks to beg, ask or even so much as hint for anything save drinking water from anyone other than blood relatives or other laypeople who have offered '*pavāraṇā*'.

An offer of *pavāraṇā* (literally: invitation) occurs when a layperson formally announces to a monastery or an individual monk that he or she wishes to extend an open invitation for requisites. *Pavāraṇā* is most commonly financial: it might, for example, consist of an offer to pay for a monk's travel or medical costs. *Pavāraṇā* might also be an offering of skills, such as carpentry, plumbing or cooking. *Pavāraṇā* may be limited by the donor to a particular service or be open-ended; it may or may not have a time limit. An unlimited invitation, considered the most meritorious type, usually taking the form: 'I would like to offer you a permanent *pavāraṇā* for anything you need.' Luang Por explained the principle in the following way:

You can make the *pavāraṇā* verbally: 'Venerable Sir, I offer you an invitation for the four requisites.' It can be for life if you want, or for five months, a single month or just for seven days. Make *pavāraṇā* for important things like bus or train fares ... things that lie within the scope of the four requisites, like medicines ... But make sure that you only offer *pavāraṇā* to a suitable monk. Don't make the invitation to a monk who doesn't know anything about the Vinaya - or before long, he might ask for so much you find yourself completely broke.

You may say to the monk, ‘I and my family would like to offer you pavāraṇā for as long as life lasts. Please feel free to ask for any appropriate requisite at any time. If I am not available, you may make the request to my wife or children.’ An unlimited invitation like this is a truly excellent means of spiritual enrichment. Without you doing anything at all, the merit (*puñña*) steadily accumulates. It is a very good thing to do.

While the offer of pavāraṇā could render undiscerning households vulnerable to abuse of their generosity, the pavāraṇā protocol also protects householders. In Buddhist cultures such as Thailand, lay Buddhists find it very difficult to refuse a request from a monk, even if they feel uneasy about it. When householders are aware that a monk soliciting donations from them without prior pavāraṇā is, in fact, breaking a Vinaya rule, they can refuse without fear of bad kamma. Indeed, they realize that to concede to the demand would be encouraging the monk in improper behaviour.

Luang Por strived to be a good example. In the early days of Wat Pah Pong, when conditions in the wat were spartan, he refused to take advantage of the allowance to request support from family members. At Wat Pah Pong, monks were not allowed to accept personal pavāraṇā. But sooner or later, most monks left on tudong or established branch monasteries, and he made sure they were prepared. Again and again, he instructed the monks to be circumspect in accepting any kind of pavāraṇā:

Even if laypeople offer pavāraṇā, you should imagine yourself in their position. They have families to take care of and making a living is hard. None of you have ever had to bring up a family. Do you know that sometimes people don’t have a single penny in the house? Even if they do offer pavāraṇā, you have to look at the cause, the time and the place. Don’t assume that once they’ve made the offer, the moment the thought comes into your head that you need something, you can go and ask them for it. That’s how unnecessary things begin to seem necessary; you become inconsiderate and start following defilement and craving. It is laxness, and it will lead to your downfall.

Concern for the laypeople was not Luang Por's only consideration. Individual pavāraṇā can create a bond between monk and donor that has detrimental effects on the monk's practice.

Wherever you are, be like a forest bull; don't be a village bull. A forest bull is free. Nobody puts a rope through its nose and leads it about. A village bull is tied to a stake. Wherever you go, don't let laypeople support you so well that you get attached to it. Don't let them tie you up like a village bull. Live freely like a forest bull, free to stay or go.

## MONEY

The eighteenth rule of the 'Forfeiture-Confession' (*Nissaggiya Pācittiya*) section of the *Pātimokkha* prohibits monks from accepting gold and silver or any medium of exchange, and from assuming ownership over funds held for them. Today in Thailand, it is rare to find monks outside of the Forest Tradition who strictly uphold this training rule.\* Disregard for it is undoubtedly one of the major causes of corruption throughout Theravada monastic communities. Rivalries and jealousies amongst monks, worldliness, and conspicuous consumption may all be laid at its door.

Luang Por believed that it was the renunciation of money and of the power and temptation that came with it, that guaranteed the integrity and longevity of the Sangha. He found the general disregard of this rule to be shameful. On one occasion, Luang Por was informed that a large sum of money had been discovered in the kuti of a suddenly deceased senior monk in Bangkok. He commented that he could think of no greater disgrace, no greater betrayal of one's monkhood, than that of hoarding a cache of money, and having it discovered on one's death.

\*The rule has been a cause of contention for over two thousand years. Today, the main justification for disregarding it is the argument that life in the modern world makes keeping the rule impractical. Support for this position is found in the claim that, as the rule only expressly forbids receiving gold and silver, it does not apply to money as we know it today (however, as the definition of 'gold and silver' in the Vinaya text makes clear that the term includes 'all mediums of exchange', this is a problematic interpretation).

Luang Por's policy with regard to financial offerings was hardline. He steadfastly refused to allow donation boxes in the monastery. He believed that monks should be completely disinterested in financial matters and utterly uninvolved with them. He regarded donation boxes as a subtle request for funds, and therefore unethical.

Maechee Boonyu remembered:

"When laypeople offered money, there would be a steward present to receive it so that Luang Por didn't need to be involved. If the steward was going to 'eat' any of it, then he could do so until he vomited. Sometimes the steward wasn't there and, in that case, the donors would place the money in the donation book. Luang Por completely ignored it. Sometimes money would disappear from the donation book. He'd never conduct any kind of investigation to try and find out who had taken it, even to ask if anyone had seen anybody suspicious around the kuti. All he would say was that they must have needed it."

The refusal to use donation boxes was one aspect of Luang Por's legacy, at least, that his disciples felt unable to preserve. As Thailand has grown steadily more prosperous over the past thirty years, the number of donations flowing into monasteries has increased proportionally. In response to this – and after a heated debate – the Wat Pah Pong Elders agreed to allow donation boxes in all affiliated monasteries, but with the proviso that they should be as discreet as possible. Lay donors had to be confident that their donations were reaching their intended recipients.

During his first few years as a monk in village monasteries, Luang Por followed the prevailing custom of receiving and using money. But as he pursued his studies of the Vinaya, he found he could no longer justify this practice to himself. The day he renounced the use of money was one of the turning points in his monastic life.

For over two months of the Rains Retreat I couldn't make up my mind. Then, one day towards the end of the retreat, I took the money out of the pouch – there was a few hundred baht in it – and decided that the time had come. The moment I made the decision, I felt a sense of ease. The next morning, I took the pouch full of money to a friend, a scholar monk, and tossed it over to

him where he was washing his face. ‘Take it’, I said, ‘and use it in your studies. Don’t worry about me, I’ve given it up. I made the decision last night. Please be my witness: as long as I live, under no circumstances whatsoever will I ever touch money again.’ And I’ve kept my word.

Monks who came to visit Wat Pah Pong were often inspired by the idea of giving up the use of money, but fearful that they would be unable to survive without it; their monasteries had no central fund for Sangha use. Luang Por would begin by speaking to them in purely pragmatic terms:

Wherever our monks go, we don’t have money for bus fares, but people offer us lifts. It’s better than carrying money around. If you don’t have money, it’s not that you won’t ever be able to go anywhere. It’s even better than before. If you don’t have a bus fare – start walking. It won’t be long before someone offers you a ride.

Having put their minds at rest over the practicality of renouncing the use of money, Luang Por explained that lay Buddhists are inspired by monks who refuse to use money and regularly offer assistance to them. Giving up the use of money would not leave them without basic requisites; it would allow the symbiotic relationship between monastics and laity, conceived by the Buddha, to assert itself.

But the advantage of giving up the use of money went beyond the practical. By renouncing the use of money out of respect for the Buddha’s wishes, monks received considerable spiritual gain. If they trained themselves to never ask for anything, always being willing to go without, then they were cultivating cardinal monastic virtues of contentment and fewness of wishes.

At one time, a monk who came to stay at Wat Pah Pong argued with Luang Por about the use of money. He said it was true he held money, but there was no fault involved because he used it without attachment. Luang Por replied to him dryly:

If you can eat a crate of salt without getting a salty taste in your mouth, then maybe I’ll believe you.

The Vinaya prohibitions regarding the acceptance and use of money form part of a complex set of rules and protocols established by the Buddha to govern the Sangha's dealings with the laity. The Buddha allowed the appointment of a lay steward to accept monetary donations and for monks to inform the steward of any needs that would require use of them. The most important feature of the arrangement was that monks could only remain free of transgression against the Vinaya by not assuming power over the money or considering it as belonging to them. They were to consider the money as a fund that, at least technically, still belonged to the donor, and they would continue to do so until it was spent. At Wat Pah Pong and other monasteries in Thailand where the rule was scrupulously upheld, donations would consist of the offering of a slip of paper – a ‘pavāraṇā slip’ – informing a monk or the Sangha that the donor had offered a fund for such and such a value for requisites, while the money itself would be deposited with the lay steward.

All donations made at Wat Pah Pong went into a central fund. Nobody, including Luang Por himself, had a personal bank account. The account, in the name of the monastery, was administered by a small committee of lay supporters, with the secretary of the committee keeping Luang Por informed of income and expenditures. When funds were needed for a particular project, Luang Por would inform the secretary, and the committee would arrange the necessary withdrawal from the bank.

While many of the rules concerning money, cloth and lodgings are found in the *Nissaggiya Pācittiya* section of the *Pātimokkha*, most of the rules that define the monk's way of life are found in the subsequent section of the *Pātimokkha* called *Pācittiya*. These include refraining from taking all life, digging in the earth, sitting and speaking alone with women and eating after noon. Transgressions of training rules excepting the most serious category requiring penance and rehabilitation (*saṅghādisesa*), are confessed and purified before the twice-monthly recitation of the *Pātimokha* through the following formula:

“Friend, I have fallen into an offence of such-and-such a name.  
I confess it.”

“Do you see [the offence]?”

“Yes, I see it.”

“You should restrain yourself in the future.”



\* \* \*

The preceding sections have offered a few mere glimpses of *Pāṭimokkha* training rules and how they were practised at Wat Pah Pong; a more complete exposition lies beyond the scope of this book. Attention must now be turned to the observances that supplement them.

### III. OBSERVANCES: ADDING LAYERS

It is perhaps surprising that the majority of the conventions that inform a monk's daily life are found in the protocols, allowances and injunctions of the *Khandhakas* rather than in the rules of the *Pātimokkha* proper. For example, the highly detailed procedures for formal meetings of the Sangha – including the Ordination and Uposatha ceremonies – appear in the *Khandhakas*, as do the steps to be taken in dealing with disputes. The *Khandhakas* contain most of the instructions regarding a monk's relationship to the four requisites: robes, alms-food, dwelling place and medicines. Most of the fine points of monastic etiquette are also to be found here.

A fourfold division of the monk's training in moral virtue appears in the commentarial tradition. While the first of these deals with restraint within the boundaries laid down in the *Pātimokkha*, the remaining three – the virtues of sense-restraint, of pure livelihood and of wise use of the requisites – are primarily in the *Khandhakas*. Another set of practices given particular emphasis in the training at Wat Pah Pong, known as the fourteen duties (*kicca vatta*), is also detailed in the *Khandhakas*.

The *Pātimokkha* is mostly concerned with unskilful actions and speech that monks should avoid; the skilful actions and speech that they should cultivate in their place are usually only implied. In the injunctions found in the *Khandhakas*, there is a much greater balance between things to be avoided and those recommended or acknowledged as legitimate by the Buddha's words, 'Monks, I allow you ...' The number of injunctions is so considerable that once when asked how many there were altogether, Luang Por replied, 'Zillions!'

Given that so many injunctions are mentioned in the texts, and that not all of them are free of ambiguity, it is understandable that variations of emphasis and interpretation appear even within the Thai Forest Tradition. Whereas a lay observer might see these differences to be minor, they can feel significant to the monks, as they contribute to their sense of lineage.

There are, for example, two ways in which Wat Pah Pong monks may be distinguished visually from other forest monks. Firstly, they shave their heads twice a month rather than the usual once (the Vinaya only specifies

a maximum allowable length of head hair). This more frequent shaving derived from Luang Por's view that by the end of a month, a monk's hair could be almost as long as a layman's and looked unseemly. Secondly, Wat Pah Pong monks wear the lower robe in a unique way, rolling rather than folding the cloth \* (the *Khandhaka* text is unclear on the method of wearing this robe). This style was a result of Luang Por's conviction, born of his studies, that the monks of old wore their lower robes in such a way. Luang Por adopted these two practices for himself, and when he established Wat Pah Pong, they became standard for the Sangha. As a by-product, these small but distinctive variations from the norm strengthened the sense of identity amongst Luang Por's disciples.

An idea of the comprehensiveness of the monastic observances may be gained by focusing on some of the practices prescribed for use of the bowl and robe. A monk possesses eight basic requisites: the three main robes, an alms-bowl, a cloth waistband, a needle and thread for mending robes, a razor to shave head and beard, and a water filter. Of these eight, it is the bowl and robes that have come to be emblematic of the monk. The monk appears to the world with a shaven head and clad in simple, unadorned robes that signify his renunciation of physical adornment. He carries a bowl signifying that he is an alms-mendicant, one who has surrendered all control over his physical well-being to the kindness of others.

The sheer number of the training rules and observances governing a monk's relationship with his bowl and robes, keeps it in the forefront of his mind. By having to turn his mind to them again and again as objects of mindfulness, he cannot help but develop, over time, a keen sense of respect and appreciation for them. He can never become complacent in his use of his bowl and robes.

## ROBES

Practices relating to the robes demonstrate the way that the observances dovetail with the *Pātimokkha*. Training rules govern how a monk may acquire cloth and how long he may store it before making it into a robe. One rule stipulates that a monk must never be physically separated from

\*See Appendix I

his three robes at dawn. As a result, the awareness of the location of his three robes (he only wears all three at the same time on formal occasions or on alms-round) gradually becomes a part of the monk's consciousness. A monk must also swiftly patch any hole in his robe. To encourage diligence, Luang Por taught that any hole 'large enough for a rice grain to pass through' should be dealt with on the day that it appeared. Observances, meanwhile, provide guidelines for the making of the robe, and the right way of wearing and taking care of it.

Luang Por expected all of his disciples to learn how to cut, sew and dye their own robes. He considered the making of robes an essential element of the forest Sangha tradition. It was strictly forbidden for monks to accept gifts of ready-to-wear robes purchased from a shop; accepting such robes was seen as undermining a core tradition. He taught that making one's own robes promoted a spirit of care, self-sufficiency and wholesome pride in the robe. Wearing commercially produced robes, on the other hand, led to heedlessness and a lack of respect for this core requisite, exalted in the texts as 'the banner of the arahants'.

Only after a monk had patched his robe over and over again, would he pluck up the courage to ask Luang Por for permission to make a new one. If permitted, his next stop would be the monastery cloth store where he would request a bolt of white cotton cloth.

Cutting the cloth for a Buddhist monk's robes is straightforward. Each robe consists of a simple rectangle of cloth. While the lower robe is often made of a single piece of cloth, the upper robe and the outer robe each consist of a number of smaller rectangles sewn separately and then joined together. A pattern of bars and cross-bars is sewn onto the cloth, the design of which the Buddha is said to have based upon the appearance of the rice fields of Northeast India. This pattern divides robes into seven or nine major sections. A wide hem is then sewn on all the way around the robe. Tags are sewn into the robe at the corners and neck of the two larger robes. These help to hold the robe together neatly when the monk wears it covering both shoulders on the occasions, such as alms-round, when he leaves the monastery. In the early days at Wat Pah Pong when the monks sewed by hand, making robes was a communal activity. After

some years, pedal sewing machines began to be offered to the monastery, allowing each monk to sew his own robe.\*

After the monk has cut and sewn the white cotton cloth, he gives the new robe its distinctive ochre colour with a dye produced by boiling chips of the heartwood of the jackfruit tree. Once the monk has completed the dyeing, he stores the robe carefully until the next suitable occasion at which he may formally request his new robe from the Sangha. Having received the Sangha's blessing, he recites the words relinquishing his old robe (he may only possess one of each of the three main robes) and then, reciting another Pali formula, 'determines'\*\* the new robe for use. His final task – a reminder not to become attached to the beauty of the new robe – is to make upon it (these days usually with a ballpoint pen) a small ritual disfigurement.

The robe needs much careful attention. Having no fixing agent added to the dye, a new robe's colour tends to run easily when, for example, it is sweated on or – disastrously – rained upon. The astringent properties of the jackfruit dye allow a weak solution of the dye to be effective in washing robes. In fact, it is the only viable washing agent; detergent must be avoided as it drains the colour and makes the robe smell unpleasant. For the first couple of months, the new robe must be washed with an amount of water just sufficient to moisten the whole robe, without any excess, to prevent loss of colour. While drying the robe, it must be constantly moved up and down on the clothesline to prevent too much unfixed colour dripping downwards to the hem, and to make sure that the clothesline leaves no mark on the robe.

One of the less popular observances, one that Luang Por inherited from Luang Pu Mun, required Wat Pah Pong monks to wear all three robes whenever they left the monastery. This required the two-layer outer robe being worn on top of the upper robe – reassuringly warm on winter mornings but an extremely uncomfortable experience in the hot season. It was a common sight in March and April to see monks returning from

\* In the last few years, sewing robes by hand has again become popular at Wat Pah Pong and its branch monasteries.

\*\* Determine (*a robe*): See Glossary, 805.

their alms-round at seven in the morning, their robes already patched with sweat.

If a monk complained about how many observances there were to bear in mind, Luang Por explained that they were the means by which mindfulness was grounded in the body in daily life. More than that, he would explain, they acted as a buffer preventing unwholesome mental habits and behaviours from taking root in the monk's life. A precise attention, respect and care for possessions did much to keep the mind in a wholesome state.

Don't think it's a minor matter. Do you see those mangoes? The fruits are very small; but in future they will be big. The big grows from the small. When you get into bad habits, it's disastrous.

There were also rules and observances governing the use of other allowable items of clothing and general use. The monks wore a simple shirt-like piece of cloth called an *angsa* – another rectangle of cloth which was draped over the left shoulder and attached under the exposed right arm by a tag. A bathing cloth was worn beneath the lower robe. This piece of cloth would be kept on while bathing from the communal water jars and washed out afterwards. A monk possessed two of these cloths and alternated their use. In the morning, the fresh, newly washed cloth served to dry the bowl after the meal. A square sitting cloth would be used in all formal situations.

#### THE ALMS-BOWL

In the Buddha's time, monks' bowls were generally made of clay. A moment of carelessness was all it took for one to break, and many injunctions were laid down to minimize the occasions when that might occur. Although by Luang Por's day the majority of bowls were made of iron and these days they are mostly stainless steel (far more durable than the monks who eat out of them), the original rules are still carefully observed. Nowadays, the purpose is not to protect the monks' bowls so much as their mindfulness.

Luang Por taught the monks that they should handle their bowl as if they had the Buddha's head in their hands. They were to be circumspect

before picking up or putting down the bowl. This was more than a mere ritual: although iron bowls were much more resilient than clay bowls, carelessness could easily lead to chipping the bowl's surface and the prospect of rusting. A bowl was never to be put down onto a hard surface. If placed on a raised surface such as a bench, the bowl had to be placed far enough from the edge that it might not be inadvertently knocked to the ground. No hard object was to be placed inside the bowl unless wrapped in cloth.

Lemongrass or *taew* leaves were to be used to wash the bowl. The monk was to wash it in silence and with full attention. Kneeling down, he was to wipe the bowl with a cloth, and then place it on its bamboo stand in the sun for a few minutes to ensure that it was bone dry. The bowl was to be kept in the monk's kuti in a respectful place (if not underneath the small shrine, then near the point at which he placed his head when sleeping), and with the lid slightly open so as to allow the air to circulate through it and prevent the accumulation of unpleasant odours.

Luang Por emphasized how important it was for postulants and novices to learn the correct procedures by watching the more experienced monks. He himself, would constantly monitor the monks' practice of the observances, and any carelessness he noticed would be referenced in his next Dhamma talk. To prevent these constant reminders from becoming too tiresome, every now and again he would draw upon his fund of humorous anecdotes to enshrine the points he wished to make in an easily remembered and enjoyable form. One such story concerned an unfortunate monk's adventure with a rat.

There was once a certain monk who liked to keep his fresh bathing cloth (used to dry the bowl after washing it) in his alms-bowl. One day, rather than mindfully leaving the bowl lid just slightly ajar, he pushed it open carelessly, leaving a wide gap between the bowl lid and the bowl. In the middle of the night, a rat climbed into the bowl and went to sleep on the soft cloth bed it found there. The next morning it so happened that the monk overslept. He woke to realize that dawn had passed: it was already time for alms-round. Afraid of being late and having to fast until the following morning, he threw on his robes as quickly as he could. He

grabbed his bowl and rushed out of his kuti to catch up with the other monks.

He made it to the edge of the village, breathless, just in time to take his place in the row of monks. But as he opened his bowl to receive the first offering, the startled rat jumped from its bed, out of the bowl and into the midst of the line of ladies squatting on the ground holding their plates of rice. There was panic, and there were shrieks, and then there were giggles. Once calm had been restored, the village women put their rice in the monks' bowls. It was only as he left the first line of donors behind that the monk realized that his bathing cloth was still at the bottom of the bowl, now covered with sticky rice.

Luang Por constantly pointed to a link between an intelligent attention to the monastic observances and etiquette, and the development of more subtle, wholesome qualities. The principle he propounded was, in essence, that if monks looked after the spiritual pennies, the pounds would look after themselves. Develop a habit of care and precision in external matters, and the same habit would begin to flourish in the inner world.

#### REQUESTING REQUISITES

All the offerings received by monks at Wat Pah Pong were relinquished to a central store. When a monk needed a requisite – new torch batteries, soap, toothpaste or razor blades – he would request it from the monastery storekeeper, who was usually, and not coincidentally, one of the gruffest and most intimidating monks in the monastery. The storekeeper was empowered to refuse to hand over requisites if there was evidence that monks were using them extravagantly. Frugality was considered a hallmark of the true forest monk and was much praised by Luang Por. The recollection that all of their possessions were gifts of faith, to be used with a clear awareness of purpose, featured in the verses chanted by every monk in the morning and evening services.

One monk recalled:

“During the time that I lived with Luang Por, there weren’t any shortages of the important requisites, but the distribution of them was very strict.

If your robe wasn't falling to pieces, you weren't given permission to change it. It was a little more relaxed for senior monks, but for the junior monks and novices or visiting monks, it was especially strict. Luang Por emphasized that we train to be moderate in our needs, and he lived no differently than anyone else. He wore the same quality robes, and there was nothing much to distinguish his kuti's furnishings from anybody else's. Even though his family lived close by, he never asked them for anything for himself. Whatever he was offered, he shared with the Sangha."

This communal system was aimed at promoting fairness and equality in the use of requisites, and Luang Por saw it as vital to the maintenance of social harmony. By forbidding monks from accepting offerings, even when specifically intended for them, he did much to prevent jealousy and competition for lay support amongst his disciples. As the number of branch monasteries increased, surplus requisites were funnelled to them, preventing Wat Pah Pong from ever becoming too luxurious as its fame and attendant wealth increased.

The advent of stainless steel bowls in the mid-1970s created a fresh object of desire for younger members of the Sangha. The new bowls, free from the threat of rust, were easier to look after; they were much lighter than the old iron bowls, and they seemed cool and modern. Almost everybody wanted one. But if a monk made a request to replace his old bowl, out of a hope for an upgrade to one of the new stainless steel bowls rather than from genuine need, he would come to regret it. In such cases, Luang Por was known to order that the monk be given the ugliest, second-hand iron bowl in the store. On one occasion, a monk must have been unable to conceal his chagrin at this turn of events because Luang Por, observing him, said, 'The only ugly thing here is the greed you've shown.'

Monks' cravings for a particular type of cloth, a particular kind of alms-bowl, a crocheted alms-bowl cover or even a particular brand of spoon may seem bizarre at first, and then, even a little sad. It prompts the question: what is the value of renunciation of worldly possessions if the renunciant merely transfers his attachments to more humble objects? Surely, attachment is attachment whatever its object. And if that is so, aren't monks deceiving themselves?

Luang Por did not consider a drastically simplified lifestyle to be liberating in itself; he knew well enough that the tendency towards attachment is far too strongly embedded in the unenlightened mind to be so simply bypassed. But a life pared back to essentials did play an important part in the training he was providing. Firstly, because it was a key element in sustaining the distinctive culture and identity of the renunciant forest monk. Secondly, because the nature of attachment – its impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality – is revealed far more readily when focused on a few simple objects than when dispersed amongst the wide variety of desirable things available in lay life. Thus, Luang Por constantly urged monks to keep reviewing the nature of their relationship with the requisites and to be alert to the arising of defilement, in order to give them a perspective on these attachments. For the monks who followed his advice, coarse attachments to good quality requisites tended to fade away quite quickly. After a few years, most monks would look back at their robe or bowl obsessions with self-deprecating good humour.

Reflections on the responsible use of the requisites were a staple of Luang Por's regular pep talks to the monks. 'Householders make their living with the sweat of their brow, through trials and adversity; and they still give up a portion of their income to buy food and other requisites for the Sangha.' If you took that for granted, he said, if you took it to be your right and used their offerings selfishly or mindlessly, you were creating very bad kamma indeed.

#### A CONSTITUTION

Of all the observances that were woven into the daily life at Wat Pah Pong, a number of them were key in defining the Wat Pah Pong culture and principles of training. Once the monastery had been firmly established, Luang Por formalized these observances – drawn from *Pātimokkha* training rules, *Khandhaka* observances, as well as Thai monastic tradition and personal experience – into a list of Sangha regulations. Over the following years, this list, neatly framed, would hang on the walls of the Dhamma Halls of every monastery affiliated to Wat Pah Pong. It ensured a uniformity of practice amongst monasteries far apart from each other and given a fair

measure of autonomy. Falling away from this standard endangered the monastery's affiliation.

## SANGHA REGULATIONS

1. It is forbidden for monks and novices to make requests from anyone other than blood-relatives, or from those who have offered a formal invitation (*pavāraṇā*). It is forbidden to have connections with laypeople or ordained members of other religions that are hostile to Buddhism.
2. It is forbidden to talk about the 'low arts' or study them, to predict lottery numbers, make 'holy' water, act as a doctor or an astrologer, or to make and distribute amulets and lucky charms.
3. Unless completely unavoidable, it is forbidden for a monk with less than five rains to travel alone. If a junior monk must make a journey, he should be accompanied by a monk with more than five rains.
4. Monks should always confer with the Sangha or the senior monk before embarking on any personal projects. Only when it has been agreed on as in accordance with Dhamma and Vinaya should steps be taken. Monks should not act upon their own authority.
5. Monks should be content with the lodging allotted to them. They should keep it clean and sweep the paths leading to it.
6. Monks should attend to the activities of the Sangha in harmony, meeting and dispersing in unison. Monks should not make themselves an object of the Sangha's antipathy by being deceitful, by seeking to evade admonishment, or by making excuses for errors.
7. Idle chatter is forbidden during alms-round, and while washing bowls, sweeping the monastery, hauling water, bathing, preparing the dining hall, washing robes, or listening to Dhamma talks. Monks should pay attention to whatever task they are working on.
8. After the meal, monks should help to sweep the dining hall and clean up before bowing to the Triple Gem in unison and taking their belongings back to their kutis in a peaceful manner.

9. Monks should be frugal in their needs for conversation, eating, sleeping and outgoing exuberance. Monks should maintain a vigorous wakefulness. They should help to nurse sick monks with loving-kindness.
10. It is forbidden for monks to receive money or to have anyone receive it for them. It is forbidden to buy and sell things or to barter.
11. All gifts offered to the Sangha should be kept in common. When a monk is in need of anything, let the Sangha supply him appropriately.
12. It is forbidden to gather together in groups and socialize, whether by day or night, in a public area or in a kuti, except when necessary. Even in such a case, do not be one who takes pleasure in society and revelry.\*
13. Receiving or sending letters, documents or parcels must be announced to the Sangha or to the senior monk. Only after receiving permission can the article be received or sent.
14. Monks or novices wishing to come and practise in this monastery must have a letter of permission from their preceptor or previous teacher and must have first transferred their affiliation in their monks' identity book.
15. Visiting monks and novices should show their monks' identity book to the Sangha or senior monk on their arrival. They may stay for no more than three nights unless there are necessary reasons to stay longer.

The Sangha reserves the right to deal accordingly to transgressors of these regulations.

Issued on the second of October, 1957  
Phra Ajahn Chah  
Senior Monk

\* A prohibition against smoking and chewing betel nut was appended at a later date.

## THE DAILY SCHEDULE

### *The Discourse on Non-Decline*

1. *As long as the monks assemble often and hold frequent assemblies, only growth is to be expected for them, not decline.*
2. *As long as the monks meet in harmony, adjourn in harmony, and conduct the affairs of the Sangha in harmony, only growth is to be expected for them, not decline.*
3. *As long as the monks do not decree anything that has not been decreed or abolish anything that has already been decreed, but undertake and follow the training rules as they have been decreed, only growth is to be expected for them, not decline.*
4. *As long as the monks honour, respect, esteem and venerate those monks who are elders, of long standing, long gone forth, fathers and guides of the Sangha, and think they should be heeded, only growth is to be expected for them, not decline.*
5. *As long as the monks do not submit to the power of any arisen craving that leads to renewed existence, only growth is to be expected for them, not decline.*
6. *As long as the monks are intent on forest dwellings, only growth is to be expected for them, not decline.*
7. *As long as the monks each keep firmly in mind: 'If there are any well-behaved fellow monks who have not yet come here, may they come; and may the well-behaved fellow monks who are already here dwell at ease', only growth is to be expected for them, not decline.*

*As long as the monks remain steadfast in these seven principles of non-decline, and as long as these seven conditions endure among the monks, only growth is to be expected for them, not decline.*

DN 16, AN 7.21-23

Luang Por was deeply influenced by the *Discourse on Non-Decline*. Its principles may be recognized as underlying much of the training system that

he developed. The first point prompted the emphasis on group practice that distinguished Wat Pah Pong from most other forest monasteries. Group meetings, group work periods and group meditation sessions lay at the heart of the daily schedule at Wat Pah Pong. Monks were regularly reminded of the importance of punctual attendance at group activities, all of which were announced by the ringing of the monastery bell.

The rigorous daily schedule was designed to ensure a continuity and consistency of effort on the part of the Sangha members. It opposed laziness and complacency. It supported those who lacked the maturity to develop their meditation practice alone in their kuti. It also provided a means of filtering those with genuine commitment from those without it. Nobody hoping to enter the Sangha and enjoy a life of leisure would choose to live at Wat Pah Pong.

#### EARLY RISING

The day began at 3.00 a.m. with the sound of the monastery bell. Luang Por instructed the monks to get up the moment they heard the bell, to perform their morning ablutions, gather their robes and bowl, and get to the Dhamma Hall as quickly as possible. Some of the more diligent monks would get up even earlier and already be in the hall, sitting in meditation, when the bell began to ring.

Communicating the daily schedule was not the bell's only function. Luang Por also saw it as a teaching tool. Monks were taught that by getting up the moment they became conscious of the sound of the bell, without second thoughts, they were developing a firm and resolute habit of mind. Monks who overslept and came late to the Dhamma Hall, having endured a few emphatic words of admonishment ('disgraceful!', 'unacceptable!'), would be told to consider it a warning sign. If the bell and the social pressure of group sessions were insufficient to motivate the monk to practice, then how would he sustain his sitting and walking meditation when alone in his kuti? 'Come night', Luang Por growled to one monk, 'and all you'll want to do is sleep.'

One monk remembered:

“If there was anybody already meditating when you arrived at the Dhamma Hall, then you had to be careful not to let your flip-flops make a ‘thwacking’ noise as you approached. If you had hard objects in your shoulder bag – like a mug, a spoon or a fruit knife – then you had to keep them wrapped in a face-cloth so they wouldn’t knock together as you walked in. You had to enter the hall so softly and silently that people meditating there wouldn’t be aware of it.”

While most of the more senior monks were dedicated enough to get up at 3.00 a.m. every day and meditate alone in their kutis through to dawn, few of the younger members of the community, particularly the teenage novices, could sustain such a practice for very long. For them, the support of the group was vital. Initially, some of the newer members of the community attended the early morning sessions more through a mixture of pride and fear than by devotion to the training. But as time went on, giving in to the schedule usually forged good habits that gradually became second nature. Luang Por encouraged the senior monks, who might have preferred to spend the time in solitude, to attend early morning sessions as a gesture of support for the younger ones, to be a good example and to maintain the harmony of the Sangha.

#### MORNING SESSION

The morning meditation was followed at 4.00 a.m. by a period of chanting. It began with a detailed recitation of the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and was supplemented by a selection of daily reflections and longer chants that would be varied throughout the week. Regular chants included: an analysis of the physical body in terms of thirty-two constituent parts; a reflection on old age, sickness, death and the law of kamma; a recollection of the correct way to make use of the requisites; a reflection on loving-kindness; and a dedication of merit.

In the early 1970s, Luang Por authorized the adoption of the Pali-Thai chanting manual newly produced by one of his great contemporaries, Ajahn Buddhadāsa. This manual contained excellent translations of the Pali texts which alternated with the original in a concise and rhythmic manner; each line of Pali being followed by its corresponding line of Thai. Especially impressive were translations of key passages from some of the

most important discourses in the *Pali Canon*, including those explaining the Eightfold Path and Dependent Origination. Another chanting text dealt with the reflection on the four requisites:

*Wisely reflecting, I use the robe, only to ward off cold, to ward off heat, to ward off the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, burning and creeping things, only for the sake of modesty.*

MN 2

Chanting acted as a ritual expression of the unity of the community by requiring that monks learn how to listen to each other and blend their voices together. Its value as a meditation lay in the fact that mindfulness of the sounds and meaning of the chanting provided a path into wholesome states of mind more accessible to the younger and more restless members of the Sangha than sitting meditation, particularly so early in the morning. It also provided the means to overcome the sloth and torpor that was always the enemy of monks who tried to cut sleep down to the minimum. Chanting was also considered to be auspicious in itself. Since the time of the Buddha, the sound of his teachings chanted with devotion, was believed to give joy to celestial beings (*devas*) and to generate a potent spiritual energy. Physically, however, chanting could be an uncomfortable experience. The morning and evening devotional chants require that the monk sits on his haunches with his weight distributed between knees and toes. For one unused to this posture, after a few minutes the pressure on the toes becomes excruciating and heat builds up throughout the body.

Although chanting books were available, Luang Por urged his disciples to memorize as many of the chants as they could. By doing so, they were able to build up an inner repertory of the root teachings and reflections both in Pali and their own tongue. It was not unusual for a line from one of the chants to suddenly appear in a monk's mind at an exactly appropriate moment during the day, allowing a release of some attachment or a surge of well-being. There were many chants to learn. Apart from those that featured in the morning and evening services, monks and novices were expected to memorize the *Paritta* verses chanted for blessing and protection on auspicious occasions, and the *Mātikā* verses chanted at funerals.

With the conclusion of morning chanting, the monks practised sitting meditation for the last few minutes until the end of the session at 5.00 a.m. After paying homage to the Triple Gem, the monks would file out to the dining hall directly behind the Dhamma Hall where they would sweep and wipe down the floors and benches with damp cloths, set up their places for the meal and get ready for alms-round. The younger monks and novices would help the older monks by preparing their robes and then, squatting down at their feet as they put them on, join the tags at their bottom corners.

#### ALMS-ROUND

The daily alms-round is one of the ascetic practices encouraged by the Buddha that was compulsory for all healthy monks at Wat Pah Pong. A monk who missed alms-round through oversleeping or laziness was expected to forgo his daily meal. The importance that Luang Por gave to alms-round was seen by all in his own devotion to the practice. In later years, despite the deterioration of his health and his reliance on a walking stick, he refused to completely abandon it. While the monks were making their way to local villages, he would walk slowly to the Maechee Section at the western end of the monastery and receive alms from the nuns.

There were seven alms-round routes, one for each of the seven surrounding villages. The walk to and from the villages was on average about five kilometres. Two of the villages, however, required a walk of some eight kilometres. Monks on the longer routes would leave as soon as the sky changed colour (usually shortly after 5.00 a.m.); the rest left a while later. Thus the time when monks entered the village – later in the winter, but usually around 6.00 a.m. – was more or less uniform. Most of the monks would have returned to the monastery by 7.00 a.m.

Some monks preferred a long walk in the morning, others a shorter one and they were free to choose the routes that suited them best. The monks could walk to and from the village at their own pace, but would form into a single file – the order of which was determined by seniority – before beginning the alms-round itself. A monk unable to join the alms-round for any reason was expected to let others know in advance. It was important that monks arrived at the village more or less together. A group of monks

having to stand at the edge of the village for a long time waiting for stragglers to arrive before forming the alms-round line was considered unsightly.

The monks always followed the same route through the village. As they entered it, the regular donors would be standing outside their houses, bamboo containers of sticky rice in hand. The women would have been up since first light cooking rice on their charcoal stove, and they would have been enjoying a few minutes chat with their neighbours, waiting for the monks to arrive. Often, the women would bring one or more of their children or grandchildren out with them, in order to teach them how to offer food and pay respects to the Sangha. In some households, it was the man of the house who put the food in the monks' bowls; and in others, it was one of the children.

The Vinaya forbids monks from begging for food from laypeople. Monks on alms-round walk silently and in single file, stopping only to allow those wishing to offer food to do so. A strong ritual element to the alms-round is present throughout. Generally, no greeting or conversation is involved. The monks avoid eye contact with the donors and do not say thank you; it is understood that they are providing an opportunity for the donors to make merit by practising generosity.

In the villages surrounding Wat Pah Pong, the majority of villagers, squatting down out of respect, would simply drop a small lump of sticky rice into each monk's bowl. Some people might offer bananas, rice sweets or dried fish as well, but only the wealthiest families could afford to do so on a regular basis. A gift of a few lumps of sticky rice was something even the poorest family could afford. It made the alms-round an occasion when every household in the village could tangibly contribute to the well-being of the Sangha and feel a sense of participation in the life of their religion.

Alms-round also played a central role in fostering a warm relationship between the local villages and the monastery. Although they seldom spoke to each other, a sense of familiarity and warmth between monks and laypeople would develop over a period of months and even years.

That alms-round is not solely concerned with the gathering of alms is indicated by the old Thai monastic idiom referring to it: '*prot sat*', or

'saving sentient beings'. Seeing the monks' restrained and dignified demeanour first thing in the morning is intended to uplift the minds of the donors and remind them of the moral and spiritual values they revere. This idea – that monks' demeanour on alms-round could be inspiring to laypeople and even lead them to a new or increased faith in the Dhamma – goes back to the time of the Buddha. The story of the meeting between Ven. Assaji, one of the first group of great, fully enlightened monks, and Sāriputta, the ascetic who would go on to become one of the Buddha's Chief Disciples, was one of Luang Por's favourites.

It doesn't take a lot to proclaim the Dhamma. Some of the Buddha's disciples, like Ven. Assaji, hardly spoke. They went on alms-round in a calm and peaceful manner, walking neither quickly nor slowly, dressed in sober-coloured robes. Whether walking, moving, going forwards or back, they were measured and composed. One morning, while Ven. Sāriputta was still the disciple of a brahman teacher called Sañjaya, he caught sight of Ven. Assaji and was inspired by his demeanour. He approached him and requested some teaching. He asked who Ven. Assaji's teacher was and received the answer, 'The Revered Gotama.'

'What does he teach that enables you to practise like this?'

'Not so much. He simply says that all dhammas arise from causes. If they are to cease, their causes must cease first.'

Just that much. That was enough. He understood. That was all it took for Ven. Sāriputta to realize the Dhamma.

Monks, of course, did not always live up to these ideals. Appropriate behaviour on alms-round was a recurrent theme in Luang Por's Dhamma talks. On one occasion, he upbraided a group of heedless young monks and novices for walking out of the monastery like, 'a bunch of boisterous fishermen going out to catch fish'. He would point out the value of alms-round to all involved, monks and laypeople, and he advised monks disturbed by this kind of misbehaviour:

Don't talk with the garrulous ones. Talk with your own heart a lot. Meditate a lot. The kind of people who enjoy talking all day are like chattering birds. Don't have anything to do with them.

Put your robes on neatly and then set off. As soon as you get into your stride, you can start memorizing the *Pātimokkha*. It makes your mind orderly and bright. It's a sort of handbook. The idea is not that you should get obsessed with it, simply that once you've memorized it, the *Pātimokkha* will illuminate your mind. As you walk, you focus on it; and before long you've got it, and it arises automatically. Train yourself like that.

Alms-round performs another important function for the Sangha. It constitutes the monks' most tangible practice of Right Livelihood – the fifth of the factors of the Eightfold Path. By going on alms-round, monks procure the requisites they need to maintain their health and strength in a way appropriate to *samaṇas*: not making demands from laypeople or seeking to coerce them in any way. The Buddha once instructed his disciples:

*'We will not exhibit any impropriety or do anything inappropriate for the sake of alms-food. Not gaining alms-food, we will not be agitated. Gaining alms-food, we will consume it without being enslaved by it, without being infatuated with it, without committing any offence, seeing the dangers and discerning the escape.' Thus, monks, should you train yourselves.*

SN 16.1

There are additional benefits. Firstly, alms-round provides good physical exercise: a walk of between two and ten kilometres in sometimes trying conditions. In the hot season, a monk with a completely empty stomach, returning to his monastery as the sun rises in the sky, carrying a large metal bowl full with some four or five kilos of sticky rice will have had a vigorous workout. Alms-round gives many opportunities for the cultivation of patience and endurance. Some routes entail walking barefoot along rough gravel roads that demand considerable fortitude. Alms-round is not cancelled due to bad weather, and in a rain storm, the umbrellas the monks carry only save them from a soaking in the absence of wind.

Emerging from the forest and entering a village provides many challenges to a monk's self-possession. He may feel his eyes and ears being pulled one way and another as he walks along. For this reason, alms-round provides him with a daily test of the strength of his powers of sense-restraint. For advanced meditators, it may also provide potent triggers for insight. Occasionally, monks at Wat Pah Pong who had meditated on the nature of the physical body to a profound level would experience spontaneous visions of alms-givers as moving skeletons, leading to a further deepening of their meditation. Others gained a new understanding of Dhamma from such experiences as the sight of old and sick people, the sounds of a young couple arguing violently, or the screams of a pig about to be slaughtered.

At the very least, alms-round provides the monk with a daily reminder that he is dependent on others for his living. It helps to prevent him from taking his daily meal for granted. He knows that every grain of rice he eats has been produced through the blood, sweat and tears of others. Monks, fresh from spending the early hours of the day in meditation, can be so sensitive to the kindness of the donors that profound feelings of love and compassion arise in their mind. It reminds them that, throughout their moral and spiritual struggles, there are people who wish them well, who see the value of what they are doing and want to support their work. Luang Por would say to the monks, 'There's so much Dhamma to be learned on alms-round.'

#### MEALTIME

Monks at Wat Pah Pong would take their one daily meal in the monastery dining hall, situated immediately behind the Dhamma Hall and oriented along the same east/west axis. It was a severe-looking structure: a long, thin concrete box roofed with galvanized iron. Stretching along the inside of both long walls, and below a line of small, barred, glassless windows, were platforms some seventy centimetres high and a metre and a half wide, comprised of sturdy wooden benches pushed together into a continuous line. Along these, the monks sat according to seniority, facing outward across the aisle. Luang Por himself sat on a detached platform at the narrow top end of the hall, his gaze encompassing both rows of monks

stretched out in front of him. Nobody in the hall could forget even for a minute that they were in Luang Por's direct line of vision.

The monks sat on their brown cotton sitting cloths with their bowls, stripped of their crocheted woollen covers, resting on their squat bamboo stands at one side of them. The covers, neatly folded in the prescribed way, were placed behind them. Each monk would have his shoulder bag, also folded in the prescribed way, set back near the wall. In front of it, arranged in a neat line, stood the monk's aluminium water kettle\*, metal mug and spittoon.

Luang Por taught that the food received on alms-round should be considered as a gift to the Sangha as a whole; the monks who received it were merely acting as the Sangha's individual representatives. On their return to the monastery (after washing their feet outside the dining hall and either folding their outer robes or airing them in the sun), the monks would tip the food in their bowls into big enamel receptacles that were carried around by the postulants. The monks were allowed to keep as much sticky rice as they needed. This they moulded into a ball and placed in the bottom of their bowl. The rest of the food was taken to the kitchen for sorting and preparation by the maechees and the local villagers who had come to participate in the meal offering.

Once prepared, the food would be wheeled over from the Wat Pah Pong kitchen in a handcart and the pots placed on the floor in front of Luang Por in two sets, one for each side of the hall. Then, all but the most senior monks would get up from their seats and formally receive the food from a postulant or layman. After Luang Por had been offered his choice of food, they then proceeded to distribute it into each monk's bowl. Efficiency and impartiality were the goals of the distribution. Monks had no control over the volume or kind of food that went into their own bowl, except for the dishes they distributed themselves. Unsurprisingly, certain monks could sometimes be seen trying to commandeer dishes which they particularly enjoyed or for which they harboured a particular aversion; others made firm determinations to resist the temptation.

\*Water tanks collected rain water from filtered pipes connected to the guttering of the dining hall. These tanks provided the monastery's supply of drinking water. Each monk had his own water-kettle.

Returning to their seats after the food had been distributed, some monks might be observed glancing into their bowls and suppressing a sigh at the sight before them: all the different dishes thrown together inside, perhaps something sweet floating in an oily, spicy curry, and other items completely submerged. They would put the lids back on their bowls and sit quietly until Luang Por led them in a short chant of appreciation and blessing for the donors. Following this, they would remove the lids from their bowls and contemplate the food. They were taught to remind themselves that they ate merely as a means of keeping their body healthy and fit for the work of Dhamma practice. They were to avoid gluttony and to refrain from indulging in the pleasant feelings that naturally arose while eating. After a short time, Luang Por would then take his first mouthful. As soon as he did so, the two monks at the head of each row followed suit. Then, the next two monks started to eat and so on all the way down to the end of the long line.

In the dining hall, the monks focused their attention on being as silent as possible. Big pots, small pots, kettles, spittoons – everything had to be handled with delicacy and care. While eating, monks had to be careful not to make chomping or slurping sounds (or ‘capu-capu’ and ‘suru-suru’, as the Pali has it). A monk who allowed his metal spoon (the only eating implement allowed) to scrape against his bowl would earn an admonitory grunt from Luang Por.

The method of distribution of the food was fast, practical and a powerful tool for overcoming attachment to its flavour; but it did lead to waste.\* In later years, particularly, there was usually far too much in the bowl to eat, increasing the challenge to know when to stop. Overeating could cast a dull, heavy shadow over the whole day, as one monk remembered from his own early struggles:

“He taught us to eat moderately. He told us to estimate when we were three mouthfuls short of being full and then to stop and drink water until we felt full. He said, ‘If you eat too much, after the meal you’ll be dull and sleepy and disinterested in meditation.’ He was right. If you eat too much

\*These days, monks usually serve themselves from offered dishes of food arranged on a long table. The effort to reduce waste has taken precedent over the ascetic practice.

you feel bloated, and you don't feel like practising walking meditation. You're still on your way back to your kuti, and already thoughts of a nap are coming into your mind."

When all the monks had finished their meal, Luang Por would ring the small bell beside him, the entire community would bow three times together and then exit the dining hall carrying their bowls and stands, with spittoons in the lids, in the specified way being careful to avoid any clanking of hard surfaces. Outside, on the long porch area, they would take off their robes, fold them mindfully, and take their bowls to the bowl-washing area at the edge of the forest where there were water jars and a deep rubbish pit. The bowls were laid on bound grass circles and washed with leaves (in later years, detergent) as stated above.

After the bowls had been washed, dried, aired in the sun for a few minutes and covers put on, the monks would don their robes once more and return to their seats in the dining hall where Luang Por would still be sitting. Often, laypeople who had come to offer food would be taking this opportunity to speak with him. Some days, he might give a discourse, on others, make announcements, but more often than not, he would ring a small bell once more and the monks would bow three times to the Buddha image, three times to Luang Por and then return to their kutis. There they would clean their teeth, sweep the area around their kuti, put their robes up to air on a line and start to practise walking meditation.

#### AFTERNOON SCHEDULE

Monks were free to structure the middle hours of the day as they saw fit. Apart from being time to deepen their meditation practice, it was also used for seeing to various personal chores. Most monks would take a short nap around midday. At 3.00 p.m. the monastery bell would be rung and all the monks and novices would leave their kutis with their brooms and make their way to the central area in order to sweep the fallen leaves. This was also the time to sweep and wipe down the floors in the Dhamma Hall, dining hall and Uposatha Hall. Sometimes Luang Por would lead the monks in a longer work project such as building or repairing kutis. But the daily tasks consisted of hauling water and sweeping leaves.

Ajahn Jun recollected the benefits of the routine:

“At three o’clock, the bell would be rung and we’d come together to do the daily chores. Some monks would sweep and wipe down the Dhamma Hall and dining hall, others would draw water up from the well for drinking and general use. A group of monks would carry the water in old oil drums to the toilets and to Luang Por’s kuti, to the bowl-washing area, to the laypeople’s toilet block. We’d also clean the toilet blocks. Luang Por said that cleaning toilets was fitting work for monks, work hard to find – why should we be averse to it? Lay visitors don’t clean the toilets, it’s the responsibility of the resident monks. More than that, Luang Por would say, it’s good practice: doing something we don’t want to do, wearing away the defilements.”

As always, the emphasis was on harmony and the cultivation of good friendship. Working together was as much a means of nurturing the sense of community as group meditation and chanting. One day Luang Por instructed the Sangha:

When you’re working or doing the daily chores, don’t be deceitful or devious. Don’t think it’s a good thing if you can get away with doing less than your share – that’s defilement ... Know your mind, keep abreast of its movements, and then your actions will have no unpleasant consequences and your life will be of benefit to the religion (*Sāsana*). Look inwardly at your mind and outwardly at your actions so that you can protect them both.

Monks were cautioned not to let their personal affairs take precedence over group activities. When the bell was rung, everyone was expected to immediately put down whatever they were doing and make their way to the central area. It was through this punctuality and steady commitment to group chores that the harmony of the Sangha was grounded. ‘Be alert to what needs to be done’, ‘Be observant’ – these were constant exhortations. The senior monks had an important role to play.

If the senior monks let things go, then so will everyone else. How can the younger ones be expected to know what to do? Who will they take as their example? If something needs to be seen to and is neglected, then lazy habits grow and grow.

Occasionally, after the daily work period, at around five in the evening, a novice might bring out a big aluminium kettle filled with a hot sweet drink made from the cooking and straining of ‘allowables’ such as bael fruit, tamarind or ginger. In later more prosperous days, cocoa or coffee became popular. Once a week or so, there might be *samor* or Indian gooseberry – bitter laxative fruits (sanctioned by the Vinaya for consumption in the evening) – which were eaten with salt and chillies. Not at first glance an obvious object of desire, these were considered a treat, and many monks would consume them avidly. Every once in a while, teenage novices and young monks would go on a myrobalan binge, resulting in a night of purging diarrhoea which the afflicted accepted with considerable stoicism.

The behaviour of the teenage novices became more of an issue for the Sangha during the 1970s when Luang Por gave the opportunity for significantly more of them to ordain. Life in the monastery was not easy to adapt to, and the occasional excessive reactions to all the restrictions on their behaviour were unsurprising. Mostly these incidents involved food and drink. After the evening kettles of sweet drink had been passed around twice, most of the monks would head off to the well for their evening bath. The drink remaining in the kettles and about to be tipped away could be a strong temptation for those remaining. Every now and again, someone would decide that it would be a shame to see it all go to waste. One such occasion earned a sharp rebuke from Luang Por:

Think about that time when we were building the Uposatha Hall and some coffee was brought over. Afterwards, I heard some people complaining, ‘Ohhh! Enough! Enough! I’ve had so much I feel sick.’ That’s a truly disgusting thing for a monastic to say! Drinking so much you feel like vomiting. Seven or eight cups each. What were you thinking of? It’s taking things too far. Do you think you became monastics in order to eat and drink? If it was some kind of competition, it was an insane one. After you’d finished, the cups were left out in a long line and so were the kettles. Nobody did any washing up. Only dogs don’t clean up after they’ve eaten.

Luang Por was insistent that the consumption of any drinks and medicinal fruits in the monastery be restricted to an agreed time and place, and open to all. A monk who received some individual gift from his family would be encouraged to relinquish it to the kitchen. Private parties in monks' kutis were absolutely forbidden. Luang Por saw small private gatherings as leading to cliques within the monastery and to heedless behaviour:

You get together eating Indian gooseberries or lumps of palm sugar or whatever and you get chatting and before long you're off, right around the world. You start talking about worldly subjects and before long you're on to disrobing, and what you'll do after you've left the monastery. You're noisy and boisterous, and in all your high spirits you forget your responsibilities as monks.

#### EVENING CHANTING

The monks would bathe every day at one of the designated open bathing areas distributed through the forest. Each monk would take his own bar of soap and sluice his body with well water scooped with a plastic dipper from one of the large earthenware jars. After bathing, the monks would practice walking meditation until the bell rang for the evening session. In the early days of Wat Pah Pong, sessions would include a talk from Luang Por almost every night, but in later years as his health declined, Luang Por's addresses to the Sangha were less frequent. Ajahn Sukchai said:

"Luang Por emphasized the chants because he wanted us to take them away and meditate on them ... He always seemed so enthusiastic about teaching us; he really wanted us to benefit from the practice. It was like we were metal he was hammering out flat on the anvil; or like wood he was hewing down to the right size for sawing. He put so much into teaching us. Whoever couldn't take it, left. He wouldn't coddle anyone. He wanted us to be well trained. During the day, he told us not to read books but to memorize chants ... and then to meditate, sitting and walking. He didn't want us to socialize, to sit around chatting in a noisy boisterous way.

"The evening session would end at nine or ten o'clock, sometimes eleven and everybody would go back to their kutis and carry on with their

practice. Luang Por said we shouldn't sleep before eleven o'clock. On Observance Day, everybody would determine not to lie down for the whole night. We would meditate together at the Dhamma Hall with the laypeople until three in the morning and then start the morning chanting."

#### NO EXCEPTIONS

Despite being a gifted orator and giving far more formal instruction to his disciples than was common in the Forest Tradition, Luang Por gave first priority to leading by example. He was careful about setting precedents. It was clear that he sought to provide a model for all his disciples to bear in mind when they became leaders in their own right. Ajahn Jun recalled that, at one point, the monastic community became worried about Luang Por's health. In addition to leading the Sangha in every group activity, he also attended to many extra duties as the abbot and had little time to rest. But when the Sangha formally invited Luang Por to take a break from group activities whenever he wished, he refused. He said that he would participate for as long as he was able. He wanted no special privileges; he needed none. The unspoken words that everyone heard were: 'If I can attend all the sessions with all my responsibilities, then all of you certainly can.' When Ajahn Sumedho (his first Western disciple) arrived, Luang Por made it clear that he would not be given any special treatment:

I'd never seen a Westerner before; I didn't know him. I'd just heard that his country was a wonderful place. But I hadn't seen it; I'd just imagined what it must be like. When he asked to live here, I started to feel a little uneasy. I was worried, you see. Why? Because he had been used to a comfortable and convenient life; how was he going to endure the difficulties of living in the forest like this? But he said he could do it, and so I made a condition: I said he could stay, but I wasn't going to give him any special treatment. At home, he used to eat bread and milk and cheese to his heart's content, but I wasn't going to provide those things for him.

Needless to say, Ajahn Sumedho arrived at Wat Pah Pong without the slightest expectation that the monastery would provide him a daily ration

of cheese sandwiches and a glass of milk. But he did accept Luang Por's point that he must conform to the way things were done and not expect any special privileges. The practice was one of going against the grain of old habits and desires, and of learning how to adapt wisely to situations.

The Vinaya, and the observances in particular, allowed people of different personalities and from different backgrounds to live together with remarkably little friction between them. Practice of the observances gave new members of the Sangha a sense of ease in monastic life. While their meditation practice might still be in its infancy, the diligent practice of the observances gave them a wholesome pride in their monkhood. Luang Por explained how keeping the observances was empowering:

Once, a long time ago, I was up north of here staying with some elderly monks. They were Luang Tas – they'd only been ordained for a couple of years – and by then I'd already been a monk for ten years. While I was there I put a lot of effort into practising the observances. I helped those old monks with their robes and bowls, with emptying spittoons, all kinds of things. I didn't think I was doing anybody any favours; I considered that I was practising my observances. I thought that even if nobody else practises these observances, I will; the profit is mine. It made me feel a good, wholesome pride. On the Uposatha Day I'd sweep the Uposatha Hall and put out water. The other monks didn't know these observances and so weren't bothered about them, and I didn't say anything. I felt that wholesome pride when I performed the duties, and when I practised sitting or walking meditation I felt good, meditation went well. I felt energetic because keeping the observances is energizing.

Outwardly composed, inwardly bright and wakeful: this was the ideal that the monks in training at Wat Pah Pong were to work towards. By orienting monks' minds in very precise ways towards the immediate physical and social environment, the observances helped to reduce the dangers of serious meditators falling prey to self-absorption. Luang Por did not want a training that produced an elevated, other-worldly narcissism. Taking on responsibilities and making sacrifices for the common good had to balance the periods of formal meditation practice.

Wherever in the monastery something needs doing, if you know how to do it, then see to it. If you find something dirty and untidy, then sort it out straight away. Not for anyone else's sake, or to make a good name for yourself, but for the sake of your practice. When you have that motivation, cleaning things is like sweeping dirt out of your mind. Whenever there's some heavy work to be done, then everyone should lend a hand. Nothing takes very long if the whole Sangha helps out.

Luang Por was especially critical of monks who shirked their share of community work, and took advantage of the hard work of others:

At one time, I was living with a large group of monks. On robe-washing day, I'd go out to chop the jackfruit chips and prepare the water. As soon as the water was boiling, a few of the monks and novices would arrive, do their washing and dyeing, and then disappear. They'd leave their robes out on the line and go back to their kuti for a nap without ever helping to put things away or wash things out. They thought they were onto a good thing, but in fact, what they were doing was the crassest stupidity. Think about it: your friend does the work and you reap the fruits without doing anything to help him. Absolutely nothing good will come of that kind of behaviour. If monks neglect their duties and think that the less work they can get away with doing the better, then they will not be able to live in the community.

It's like two oxen pulling a cart. The cunning one gets harnessed right in front of the yoke and leaves the other one to struggle up front. The ox near the yoke can go all day without getting tired. It can keep going or it can rest, it can do whatever it likes because it's not taking any weight and not expending any energy. With only one ox pulling it, the cart moves slowly.

## BOWING

Expressing devotion to non-material realities, such as wisdom and compassion, by bowing to material forms expressive of them – Buddha images in particular – is an ancient Buddhist practice. The nature of the bow

varies somewhat throughout the Buddhist world. In Wat Pah Pong, a precise version of the Thai style of bowing was taught. It begins with adoption of the kneeling posture. Hands are brought prayer-like to the chest, briefly raised to the forehead, and then placed flat on the floor about twenty centimetres apart, palms downwards. The forehead is lowered to touch the floor between the hands, eyebrows in line with the tips of the thumbs, elbows close to knees, forearms flush with the floor. After a slight pause, there is a return to the initial kneeling position, and the movement is repeated twice more. Three bows: one for each of the three refuges.

Bowing can be a very satisfying practice, and yet, at the same time, it can easily be treated as a perfunctory ritual. For dedicated practitioners, the sensation of the forehead pressing against the floor may have such a profound emotional effect that they feel tears of joy.

Bowing became one of the defining features of the training at Wat Pah Pong. Luang Por and his disciples bowed a great deal – far more than was usual in Thai monasteries (monks in the city sometimes referred to it as ‘that monastery where they bow all the time’). For Luang Por, bowing was both a short ritual reminder of the guiding ideals of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and a practical tool for grounding awareness in the present moment. In most monasteries, monastics bow to the Buddha on formal occasions such as during the morning and evening services, or on paying respects to a senior monk. Luang Por taught, in addition, that his disciples should bow every time they entered or left a building and every time they approached or took leave of a senior monk. Monks at Wat Pah Pong could expect to bow over a hundred times a day. Bowing as a means to regularly re-establish mindfulness was a practice Luang Por had learned as a young monk from Luang Pu Kinaree, and one on which he laid great store:

Bowing is very important. Although it's only a physical gesture, it's a part of the practice. You should bow in the correct way, and when you're in a group, bow at the same time as everyone else. Don't arch your body. Don't hurry too much. With body straight, slowly incline the head downwards until your forehead touches the floor. Place your elbows about three inches from the knees. Bow slowly, mindful of the body.

◆

Bowing helps to cure conceit. You should bow often. As you prostrate three times, keep in mind the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.

◆

Don't make the mistake of watching how others bow. If young novices are sloppy or the aged monks appear unmindful, that is not for you to judge. People can be difficult to train. Some learn fast, but others learn slowly. Judging others will only increase your pride. Watch yourself instead. Bow often, get rid of your pride.

◆

When you hear the monastery bell ring, bow before you leave your kuti. On the first bow, sincerely recollect the virtues of the Buddha; on the second bow, sincerely recollect the virtues of the Dhamma; and on the third bow, sincerely recollect the virtues of the Sangha. Then slowly walk out of your kuti. If, when you arrive at the central area to help with the sweeping or some other group activity, you realize that you forgot to bow, then go back to your kuti and bow. Train yourself until bowing become second nature to you. When the work is over and you go back to your kuti, then bow again. Bow before you start to meditate, bow before you leave your kuti. Don't let this practice slip; continually maintain it ... If you go to urinate or defecate or to have a bath, then on your return, bow. Develop this practice until you remember it wherever you are. As soon as you sit down, you bow. With a mind of faith, bowing down while recollecting the virtues of the Triple Gem, can cause the hairs to stand up on the back of your neck, and for you to feel thrilled by rapture.

#### RESPECT FOR ELDERS

In the Discourse on Non-Decline quoted above, the fourth of the factors predictive of the non-decline of the Sangha is listed as respect for elders. Luang Por, always with an eye on the long-term welfare of his monastery,

made this a key feature of Wat Pah Pong culture, and he considered it a vital element in sustaining the kind of social harmony appropriate to a community of samanas. Over the course of time, friendships and occasional enmities rose and fell away within the community in the natural way. But by insisting that monks always relate to each other strictly within the boundaries provided by monastic etiquette, Luang Por did much to prevent significant cliques and divisions from developing in the monastery. Bowing played a central role. The requirement that on formal occasions monks bow to all other monks senior to them, gave Sangha members a constant reminder of the principle that considerations of seniority always took precedence over personal likes and dislikes.

In addition to this, whenever a monk entered into a formal conversation with another monk more senior than he,\* he was taught to keep his hands together in the prayer-like *anjali* for the duration of the conversation. Such a practice was a great help in ensuring that any words spoken were mindful, polite and appropriate. The Thai language itself supports such right speech. In conversation, word choice is often determined by the relationship between the speakers. The specific words and phrases denoting respect to elders were always used in speech between monastics. Honorifics were never omitted.

An objection is sometimes made that these social conventions muddy the waters between internal feelings of respect and external expressions of it. But does not a fixed respectful attitude, irrespective of true feelings, encourage hypocrisy? It was not seen in that way. The principle that Luang Por constantly drew upon in his training at Wat Pah Pong was that wholesome actions, performed again and again as observances, promoted correspondingly wholesome mental states. Thus, by acting in a respectful manner again and again, wholesome thoughts and perceptions were promoted and prioritized, while the unwholesome ones were marginalized.

\*Strictly speaking, one monk is considered senior to another when he has more than three rains greater than him. In practice, Wat Pah Pong monks would defer, at least in formal situations, to any monk who had entered the Sangha before them, even if the interval was less than three years.



In fact, many of the protocols guiding the relationships between junior and senior members of the community would already have been familiar to monks when they entered the Sangha at Wat Pah Pong. Over the course of hundreds of years, certain features of monastic etiquette have been adopted by Thai society as the gold standard for good manners. This is particularly true with regard to the showing of respect to elders. Mindfulness of physical space and relative position is an immediately obvious expression of these protocols. In Wat Pah Pong, a junior must never stand above a senior who is sitting down nor walk close by him without acknowledgement. If the senior sitting down is his teacher, the student needing to pass squats down and continues by on his knees, head inclined. If the monk sitting down is senior to him but not his teacher, he inclines his head as he walks by – making himself smaller.

A junior monk never touches one senior to him on the head. He never reaches above the senior's head without first asking permission. He always sits on a lower seat. In any formal setting, he never speaks without first asking for permission. If the senior is his teacher or is a revered Sangha elder, he bows three times every time he enters and leaves his presence. To a young man joining the Sangha at Wat Pah Pong, most of these conventions would have appeared to be refined versions of behaviours that were already second nature to him.

*Indeed, Ānanda, it is not possible that a monk who delights in company ... will ever obtain at will, without trouble or difficulty, the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of peace, the bliss of enlightenment.*

MN 122

One succinct teaching that Luang Por's disciples had drummed into them from the beginning of their monastic life and came to sum up the values of Wat Pah Pong was:

Eat little. Sleep little. Talk little. Practise a lot.

The dangers of gossip and frivolous speech crop up, either directly or indirectly, in a number of the Sangha Regulations. Luang Por maintained that practice would only really develop when monks were ready to face up to suffering and learn from it. Idle conversation was a prime means by which monks sought to suppress or distract themselves from suffering. That was not its only drawback. The topics of idle conversations stirred up the defilements of all involved. Socializing for frivolous purposes often led to dissension, and it undermined the harmony of the Sangha.

Of all the detrimental activities that I've seen since I've been living in the forest, none is worse than monks gathering together for frivolous conversation. This has the most harmful results. But it's also the thing that monks and novices find hardest to abstain from. It's right here that things go wrong. I don't see it having any benefit: it damages your practice, your work. It's unfitting and after it's over it gives rise to remorse. There's nothing good about it. This is where things have gone wrong in the past – right here. When you get together like this, then your speech becomes exaggerated, you start talking nonsense, laughing and teasing each other – all kinds of foolishness appear.

In a group, you start joking and playing around, then your mind becomes agitated. You don't realize how loud your voice is because you have no self-awareness, you're lost in the pleasure of it all. It's right there that you need to be mindful, not just

when you're by yourself. When you're alone, you don't need so much mindfulness; but in a group, you need a lot. With groups of monks, groups of novices, groups of laypeople – that's where you need to be mindful, not getting carried away by your mood. Keep returning to your meditation object at regular intervals. In company, your practice needs to be on a very high level.

On another occasion, Luang Por spoke of the state of mind of the practitioner and how it is reflected in his outer demeanour:

If, through this training, your mind has become lucid and calm, you will become more aloof from your friends, you won't want to socialize. If people come round to see you, you'll find it an annoyance ... The Buddha said that a group of tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands of enlightened beings can dwell together without making any noise. A hundred or two hundred real practitioners living together, and there's no sound of frivolous conversation.

## CENSORSHIP

A number of observances and monastic regulations supplemented the training rules regulating monks' contacts with laywomen. A junior monk's conversations with laywomen were restricted to family members. Speaking with any woman, including his own mother, a monk would first have to ask for permission, and to speak in a public place with at least one other male present. Luang Por viewed the sensual cravings of young monks as open wounds that were in the process of slowly healing. Contact with laypeople in general, and women in particular, was seen as unnecessarily exposing the wounds to the possibility of infection. Ajahn Jundee remembers:

"He stressed that having a lot of contact with laypeople was a cause of decline ... Monks of my generation would be in the monastery two or three years before they had a conversation with laypeople. Sometimes my sister came to visit, and we would be too scared of Luang Por to say much to each other. It was even worse if you requested permission to go home to visit your family. 'Why?' he would ask in a very stern voice. He was so

intimidating that you didn't ever want to ask again. If you wanted to visit your home, you needed a very good reason."

Female visitors to the monastery were to be received in a public area. It was absolutely prohibited for women to visit monks at their kuti. Luang Por explained how these rules protected the reputation of the monk:

If you have guests – whether it's your mother or younger sister or whoever – then meet them at the dining hall. If someone comes asking after a particular monk, no matter who it is, invite them to go and wait there. Why aren't you allowed to receive guests at your kuti? Because if a woman comes to visit you, how is anyone to know she's your sister or your mother? How is anyone else to know that it's not your ex-wife or old girlfriend?

To a modern eye, Luang Por's attitude may seem overly paternalistic. But paternalism was precisely the point. Monks voluntarily entered into a father-son relationship with the teacher, and by doing so, ceded to him the right to make such judgements concerning their spiritual welfare. Luang Por's deep knowledge of the workings of the mind made him keenly aware of how strong and deceitful the mental defilements can be. It took only a moment of heedlessness for old unskilful habits, as yet untamed, to overwhelm a monk's ideals and aspirations, and cause lasting damage both to his own welfare and reputation, and to that of the monastery. Given what was involved, over-vigilance, like the over-engineering of a load-bearing structure, was the wisest policy.

The strictures on contact with laypeople extended to correspondence:

When you receive a letter or when you're going to send one, inform Ajahn Chu or Ajahn Liem. What have you written? Read it out to one of them. When a letter arrives, give it to one of them to read first. What kind of letter is it? What's it about? Is a young woman writing to you? Is it a sensible letter? Are you in touch with the communists? Are you smuggling in secret agents? Observe whether your correspondence leads to growth in the Dhamma or decline.

## CEREMONIES I: ASKING FOR FORGIVENESS

Luang Por used many of the simple rituals found in the Vinaya texts to promote the values of harmony and good friendship in the Sangha. Of those that regulated the relationships between teacher and student, senior monk and junior monk, that of ‘asking for forgiveness’ was the most personal.

Before leaving the monastery for an extended period – to go on tudong, for example, or to take up residence at a branch monastery – a monk, wearing his main robe with right shoulder exposed and outer robe folded neatly over his left shoulder, would approach Luang Por. In his hand, he would be bearing a small tray neatly arranged upon which were candles, incense, flowers, and toothwoods that he had carved himself. After bowing three times, and then sitting on his haunches, hands in anjali and intoning the traditional Pali phrases, he would formally request forgiveness for any inappropriate actions of body, speech and mind, intentional or unintentional, public or private, that he might have committed during the period he had spent under Luang Por’s guidance.

Luang Por would first utter the Pali phrase offering forgiveness to his disciple and then, in turn, would ask for forgiveness from him in case he had inadvertently caused him distress. Then Luang Por would give a blessing followed by a Dhamma teaching. It was a ceremony that cast an uplifting seal on the preceding period. It gave the student (who might otherwise be too much in awe of Luang Por to request a private interview) an intimate meeting with his master that he would remember wherever he went in the future. If the monk harboured any regrets or fears that he might have committed some bad kamma while living with Luang Por, his mind would be put to rest by the words of forgiveness.

This ceremony was not restricted to marking the end of a period of teaching from Luang Por himself. His disciples who entered a formal training relationship with the abbot of a branch monastery were required to follow the same practice. It was considered the correct way for monks to take leave of each other. The ceremony was also performed by the whole Sangha before the beginning of a retreat period – a kind of clearing of the air, the declaration of a new beginning.

Luang Por also encouraged monks to use the ceremony as a skilful means to resolve the bad feelings that could occasionally arise between them and to make formal amends for bad behaviour. A monk does not ask forgiveness of a monk junior to him in this formal manner, it was always the junior monk that asked forgiveness of the senior (if a senior monk feels it necessary to apologize to a junior monk, he does so informally). In cases where there were hurt feelings on both sides of a dispute and the junior monk did not feel that he had done anything wrong, he would, nevertheless, be the one encouraged to swallow his pride and ask for forgiveness. Assuming the blame in this way, he handed the more senior monk an opportunity to be magnanimous, to accept his own contribution to the problem without losing face. This brief ceremony provided a surprisingly effective template for monks to use in putting grievances behind them.

Ajahn Liem, the monk Luang Por hand-picked to be his successor as abbot of Wat Pah Pong, reflected on the understanding of the ceremony of asking for forgiveness that he had learned:

“The sages consider asking forgiveness as a way of erasing bad things from the mind. Sometimes, through heedlessness or carelessness or through lack of understanding, we might have unwholesome thoughts towards our teacher. When we want them to fade away and disappear from our minds, then we perform this ceremony in order to cut off any kammic consequences.\* It’s of great benefit to Dhamma practitioners because it stops worry and agitation from overwhelming the mind. It brings to an end any suspicion and mistrust. You feel clear and bright. Your mind is at ease whether you continue to live with the teacher or go elsewhere. Asking for forgiveness is a beautiful custom. At times, even enlightened beings ask for forgiveness, in order to be a good example to their disciples and to future generations.”

\*A reference to ‘defunct’ (*ahosi*) kamma which occurs when the conditions necessary for a kammic act to bear fruit in a particular way are removed.

## CEREMONIES II: ASKING FOR DEPENDENCE

A junior (*navaka*) monk – one who has been ordained for less than five years – must ‘take dependence’ on a teacher. He does so by means of a short ceremony during which he makes the request: ‘May the Venerable Sir be my teacher. I will live in dependence on you.’ When the teacher replies in the affirmative, the student chants:

‘*Mayham bhāro; aham’pi therassa bhāro.*’

‘May you be my burden. May I be your burden.’

Through this ceremony, the monk formally declares himself willing to be trained and to be open to admonishment. Only after the initial five-year training period is over, does the monk earn the privilege to live independently of a teacher.

The ceremony is repeated by the whole monastic community at the beginning of the annual three-month Rains Retreat. First, the community formally asks for forgiveness from the teacher for any transgressions they may have committed against him during the preceding months. Then they renew their request for dependence upon him for the coming retreat. The teacher gives a blessing to his disciples and then an exhortation. On one such occasion, Luang Por taught:

You have now requested dependence. It’s as if you have nowhere to live or your home isn’t big enough ... and you ask to live in somebody’s house and become their dependent. There is advice that you need to take and certain duties that you must perform out of respect for the owner of the house. One of these duties here is that on every occasion that I teach you, you take my words away and reflect upon them and then practice accordingly. My duty is to assist you all with your material needs and to teach you the Dhamma and various observances.

So, from this day onwards, our relationship will be that between teacher and disciple. As teacher, I give you Dhamma, reflections, perspectives, knowledge and so on in a fitting measure. As you have asked me for dependence, I am happy to grant this and have

no qualms about it. If we look on each other like father and son, then our relationship will be one of mutual trust.

The Buddha taught us that if we go to a monastery and it seems to be a suitable place, then on the first or second day, whenever there is a convenient occasion, we seek permission from the teacher to stay on for a while longer or ask for dependence from him straight away. Then you can say, ‘If the Venerable Abbot should see my conduct or manners to be at fault or inappropriate, then I invite you to please, out of compassion, admonish me. I will take away what you say and reflect on it accordingly.’

This is a truly excellent thing to do. If you don’t do that, then the teacher doesn’t know what he can say to you. He doesn’t know whether or not you’re willing to be admonished, whether you’d be upset by anything. So, inviting admonishment is important; it signals respect. When a teacher such as myself hears that invitation, he feels reassured. If the disciple does something wrong, then the teacher knows that he can say something; he feels encouraged to give guidance and teaching. There are no qualms or uncertainties in his mind. Asking for dependence creates a closeness between teacher and student. The disciple opens himself up, humbles himself, and a deep mutual understanding can develop.

According to the Discipline, a monk with more than five rains is expected to have gained sufficient knowledge of the Dhamma and Discipline to live independently of a teacher if he wishes. He should know what is an offence and what is not, what is a heavy offence and what is a light one, and the way to atone for offences committed. Not all those who have been monks for five years have, of course, gained this level of maturity. In such cases, Luang Por would have them continue under dependence until he was convinced they did. He also observed that even if it is no longer compulsory, a monk who is ‘restrained and composed, respectful, heedful’ may choose to request dependence anyway, ‘like a grown-up son whose own hair has gone grey, but whose deference to his parents never wavers.’

## THE FOURTEEN DUTIES

As the word ‘injunctions’ suggests, the Vinaya texts collected in the *Khandhakas* are concerned not only with ‘acts of wrongdoing’, but also with duties and responsibilities that were to be ‘enjoined’. One hallmark of the training at Wat Pah Pong was the importance given to the practice of a set of fourteen of these duties or *kicca vatta*. Luang Por held that they promoted the individual monk’s development of mindfulness, circumspection, thoroughness and attention to one’s responsibilities, at the same time as nurturing the harmony and integrity of the Sangha. These duties are as follows:

1. The duties of a visiting monk on arrival at a monastery.
2. The duties of resident monks towards visiting monks.
3. The duties of a monk on leaving a monastery.
4. The method of showing appreciation of merit.
5. The duties in the dining hall and when receiving a meal outside the monastery.
6. The duties on alms-round.
7. The duties of a forest-dweller.
8. The duties towards the dwelling place.
9. The duties in the fire-house.\*
10. The duties in the toilet.
11. The duties of a disciple to his preceptor.
12. The duties of a preceptor to his disciple.
13. The duties of a disciple to his teacher.
14. The duties of a teacher to his disciple.

\* A precursor of the modern sauna, used for medicinal purposes.

## DUTIES TOWARDS THE TEACHER OR PRECEPTOR

Of these duties, a detailed explanation of just one pair – the duties of the disciple towards the teacher or preceptor\* – will give some idea of their sophistication.

You should all take an interest in the various duties, such as those towards the preceptor or teacher. These duties bind us together and create a sense of community and harmony. They enable us to show our respect in a way that's been considered auspicious since the time of the Buddha.

The teacher-student relationship laid down in the texts is governed by the idea of mutual responsibility. The teacher performs his responsibility to the student by teaching him and acting as a good example; the student performs his duty to the teacher by dedicating himself to the study and application of all that he has been taught and by performing various services for him. At Wat Pah Pong, the role of personal attendant was highly coveted, and the attendant was regularly rotated in order to prevent jealousy.

Attendance on the teacher is a unique kind of Dhamma practice: essentially, the monk takes the teacher's daily needs as his object of mindfulness. It is a practice that calls for devotion, patience, endurance, alertness, sensitivity and intelligence. The system by which junior monks take turns to act as the teacher's personal attendant has many beneficial effects, both for the teacher and the student. The student gains an opportunity to see the teacher's way of practice at close quarters, to be inspired by him, to develop a bond with him and to overcome his shyness in asking for personal guidance. At the same time, the teacher gets to see the disciple at close quarters and to observe his general demeanour, his mindfulness, the attitude he brings to his duties and his general character – all of which aid him in teaching his disciple in the most effective way.

The extent to which the duties to the teacher are performed is influenced to a certain degree by the age and personality of the teacher. There is less

\*The duties of the student towards the teacher and the preceptor overlap a great deal. Here the explanation will refer solely to the teacher-student relationship as Luang Por did not become a preceptor until 1976.

to do for a healthy teacher in his forties than for a frail one in his seventies. Some senior monks insist on receiving the bare minimum amount of service, and on looking after their own affairs. Generally speaking, teachers would prefer to perform themselves many of the duties that their attendants perform for them. But they submit to the conventions out of respect for the Vinaya and for the benefit of the attendant.

With certain modifications, the practice taught at Wat Pah Pong (closely based upon the original prescriptions in the *Khandhakas*<sup>\*</sup>) is as follows. Early in the morning, the attendant makes his way to the teacher's kuti and announces his arrival with a polite cough. The first duty of the morning is to prepare water for the teacher to wash his face and brush his teeth, and then to offer him a towel to dry his face. Next, the attendant offers the teacher's lower robe to him (he has been sleeping in his bathing cloth) and then his upper robe. As they walk to the Dhamma Hall, the attendant, who carries the teacher's outer robe and shoulder bag, walks ahead. In the Dhamma Hall, he takes the sitting cloth from the shoulder bag and spreads it out neatly, and then places the teacher's folded outer robe by its side. At the end of the morning session, the attendant picks up the shoulder bag and sitting cloth and takes them to the dining hall.

Next, the attendant prepares the teacher's seat in the dining hall, by neatly laying out the water kettle, spittoon, lap-cloth, stainless steel spoon<sup>\*\*</sup> and toothwood. He prepares the alms-bowl by detaching it from its bamboo stand and by rinsing it with water. He then takes the teacher's upper and outer robes and lays them out together, ready for the teacher to put on, tags already tied. The attendant carries the teacher's alms-bowl to the edge of the village before offering it to him. As soon as the alms-round is over, he requests the bowl and carries it back to the monastery ahead of the teacher. On arrival, he removes his own upper and outer robes, and empties his and the teacher's alms-bowl into a large enamel bowl which is taken by a postulant to the kitchen. Then he waits at the footbath outside the Dhamma Hall in order to wash and dry the teacher's feet. He helps the teacher out of his robes, and if they have become stained with sweat, he puts them on the line to air.

<sup>\*</sup>Vin Cv.8.11-12

<sup>\*\*</sup>Many forest monks prefer to eat with their right hand.

As soon as the teacher has finished his meal, the attendant asks permission to wash his hands. The teacher holds his hands over the spittoon, and the attendant pours water over them and dries them with a towel; he then offers him a toothwood. Following this, the attendant cleans up the teacher's seat and takes his bowl and spittoon away to wash, after which he takes the teacher's bowl back to his kuti where he stores it next to his own.

If the teacher is receiving guests during the day, the attendant monk sits quietly at his side and offers any assistance that might be needed. If it is very hot, for example, or there are mosquitoes, he may fan the teacher. If he wants to open or close a window, he must ask permission. When the teacher has company, he does not interrupt or speak unless he is spoken to. If women come to see the teacher, he is always present to ensure that the teacher is never alone with a woman. He acts as the teacher's secretary, reminding him of any upcoming appointments. He may arrange a refreshing drink for the teacher if he has been teaching for a long time. He makes sure that the teacher takes any medicines he has been prescribed at the proper time. If he notices that the teacher is tired, then he tries to find a polite way to encourage guests to leave and allow the teacher time to rest.

The attendant monk keeps the teacher's kuti clean, seeing that it is swept and wiped down regularly. Every day he sweeps the area around the kuti, the walking meditation path and the path leading to the kuti. He makes sure there is a constant supply of water in the earthenware jar for bathing and in the water kettle for drinking. He regularly puts bedding out in the sun to air. Pillow cases and blankets are regularly washed. He either makes necessary repairs to the kuti himself or informs the Sangha of what needs to be done. He keeps the toilet spotless. He makes sure that soap, toothpaste, etc. do not run out.

The attendant monk is responsible for washing the teacher's robes. He does not abandon them on the clothesline but watches over them until they are dry and then folds them neatly and returns them to the teacher's kuti.

The attendant monk prepares a fresh bathing cloth, towel and soap for the teacher's evening bath, which may either take place at a large earth-ware jar in the open or in a bathroom. If the weather is cold or the teacher is ill, the attendant may arrange for some hot water to be prepared. Elderly monks sometimes sit on a chair while bathing; others stand, tipping water over themselves with a dipper from a jar. The attendant monk helps to soap the teacher's feet, legs and back. He does not touch the teacher's head. He asks permission before his first touch of the teacher's body. Some teachers do not like to be helped with their bath, in which case the attendant stands to one side, holding the towel and fresh robes, or he may take the opportunity to wipe down the teacher's sandals. After the teacher has dried himself, he wraps the towel around his waist and the attendant squats down and tugs the wet bathing cloth down and puts it in a pail of water in order to be washed out. He hands the teacher a clean bathing cloth and lower robe. Afterwards, he collects the teacher's robes and shoulder bag and takes them to the Dhamma Hall in preparation for the evening session in the same way as he did in the morning.

Last thing at night, the attendant prepares the teacher's bed. He makes sure there is fresh drinking water, and if the teacher is elderly and there is no toilet in the kuti, he places a spittoon by the bed (which he will empty in the morning). In the cold season, he lays out blankets. If the kuti lacks mosquito screens, he prepares the mosquito net. If he has the necessary skill, he may offer the teacher a massage. Finally, when all the teacher's needs have been met, the attendant bows three times and leaves him to rest.

For a number of years, the monk considered to be foremost in the practice of service to the teacher at Wat Pah Pong, was Ajahn Ruangrit.

"In those days, Luang Por would usually go to bed in the early hours of the morning and would get up at about five. I would offer him water for washing – hot and cold – and toothwood. To begin with, I'd just offer some water for him to wash his face and rinse out his mouth, but in later days, I'd ask to take his false teeth away to clean. As for helping him put on his robes, washing them, applying medicinal cream to his body, making his bed and so on – if you could do a good job, he'd let you do it. If you did it awkwardly, he'd rather you didn't bother – sometimes he'd throw

you out. He wouldn't like to tell people to do personal things for him. He'd never tell you to clean his false teeth for him or empty the spittoon full of his urine; nor would he tell you to wash his feet or wash his robes; he would never say anything like that. But if any of his disciples were devoted to him and wanted to perform the duties towards the teacher as are laid down in the texts, and that monk had a certain competence, then he would give permission."

A great contemporary of Luang Por Chah, Luang Por Lee, gave one of the most memorable accounts of service to the teacher. The precision, the attention to detail expected of him, would be recognized by any of the disciples of Luang Por Chah.

"To be able to stay with Luang Pu Mun for any length of time, you had to be very observant and very circumspect. You couldn't make a sound when you walked on the floor, you couldn't leave footprints on the floor, you couldn't make a noise when you swallowed water or opened the windows or the doors. There had to be a science to everything you did – hanging out robes, taking them in, folding them up, setting out sitting mats, arranging bedding, everything. Otherwise he'd drive you out, even in the middle of the Rains Retreat. Even then you'd just have to take it and try to use your powers of observation.

"Every day, after our meal, I'd go to straighten up his room, putting away his bowl and robes, setting out his bedding, his sitting cloth, his spittoon, his tea kettle, pillow, etc. I had to leave everything in order before he entered the room. When I had finished, I'd take a note of where I had placed things, hurry out of the room and go to my own room, which was separated from his by a wall of banana leaves. I had made a small hole in the wall so that I could peek through and see both Luang Pu Mun and his belongings. When he came into the room, he'd look up and down, inspecting his things. Some of them, he'd pick up and move; others, he'd leave where they were. I had to watch carefully and take note of where things were put.

"The next morning I'd do it all over again, trying to place things where I had seen him put them himself. Finally, one morning when I had finished putting things in order and returned to my room to peek through the hole,

he entered his room, sat still for a minute, looked right and left, up and down, all around – and didn't touch a thing. He didn't even turn over his sleeping cloth. He simply said his chants and then took a nap. Seeing this I felt really pleased that I had attended to my teacher to his satisfaction.”

## LODGINGS

*‘We will be content with any lodging whatsoever. We will speak in praise of being content with any lodging whatsoever. We will not exhibit any impropriety or do anything unbefitting for the sake of a lodging. Not gaining a lodging, we will not be agitated. Gaining a lodging, we will use it without being enslaved by it, without being infatuated with it, without committing any offence, seeing the dangers and discerning the escape.’ Thus, monks, should you train yourselves.*

SN 16.1

Most of the kutis at Wat Pah Pong were offered by lay supporters and their families. For the local villagers, raising the money to build even a modest wooden kuti was a once-in-a-lifetime act of merit-making, and one that would give them joy for the rest of their lives. Monks were taught to honour the generosity of their kuti's donor by looking after it with great care. Neglect of this responsibility was liable to expose the guilty monk to a blunt admonishment.

There is no Sangha police force to keep order in a monastery. No corporal punishment is meted out to poorly behaved monks. When standards in the monastery dipped, Luang Por's appeals were generally to wise shame. Luang Por would point out the conflict between the actions that he was criticizing and the standards expected of one who was subsisting on the generosity of others and had made a commitment to a high level of morality and a rigorous training. Often, he would make comparisons with the great masters of old. On one occasion, towards the end of his teaching career, the state of the monastery toilets prompted a talk\* so hard-hitting that, afterwards, it had the more senior monks reminiscing about the good old days:

\* Published as *Toilets on the Path* in *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*.

During the sixth reign\*, Chao Khun Nor of Wat Tepsirin was a royal page. When the King died, he became a monk. The only time he ever left his kuti was to attend formal meetings of the Sangha. He wouldn't even go downstairs to receive lay guests. He lived in his kuti and slept in a coffin. During his entire monastic life he never went on tudong. He didn't need to – he was unshakeable. All of you go on tudong until your skin blisters. You go up mountains and then down to the sea, and once you get there you don't know where to go next. You go blindly searching for Nibbāna with your mind in a muddle, sticking your nose in every place you can. And wherever you go, you leave dirty toilets behind you – too busy looking for Nibbāna to clean them.

In his seamless approach to the training, neglect of the toilets was not a small matter. It was an indication of a worrying lack of mindfulness and responsibility that could not help but infect the other areas of the monks' practice.

Don't turn a blind eye to the state of the kutis that you live in and the toilets that you use every day. Laypeople from Bangkok, Ayutthaya, all over the country, offer funds for our needs; some send money in the post for the monastery kitchen. We are monastics, think about that. Don't come to the monastery and become more selfish than you were in the world – that would be a disgrace. Reflect closely on the things that you make use of every day: the four requisites of robes, alms-food, dwelling place and medicines. If you don't pay attention to your use of these requisites, you won't make it as a monk.

In the old days, there were no water toilets; the toilets we had then weren't as good as the ones we use today. But the monks and novices were good and there were only a few of us. Now the toilets are good but the people that use them are not. We never seem to get the two right at the same time.

People bring new toilet bowls to offer. I don't know whether you ever clean them or not, but there are rats going into the

\*The reign of King Vajiravudh, 1910-1925.

toilets to shit, and geckos. Rats, geckos and monks – all using the place together. The geckos never sweep the place out and neither do the monks. You're no better than they are. Ignorance is no excuse with something like this.

The situation with regard to dwelling places is especially bad. The kutis are in a dreadful state. It's hard to tell which ones have got monks living in them and which are empty. There are termites crawling up the concrete posts, and nobody does anything about it. It's a real disgrace. I went on an inspection tour shortly after returning to the monastery and it was heartrending. I feel sorry for the laypeople who've built these kutis for you to live in.

Everything you use in this life are supports for the practice. Ven. Sāriputta kept wherever he lived immaculately clean. If he found somewhere dirty, he would sweep it with a broom. If it was during alms-round, then he'd use his foot. The living place of a true practice monk is different from that of an ordinary person. If your kuti is an utter mess, then your mind will be the same.

Taking care of the buildings in the central area of the monastery was not only a duty, but also a means to propagate the Dhamma. By living frugally, practising contentment, and maintaining high standards of cleanliness, monks could inspire the laity without saying a word.

Make this a good monastery. Making it good doesn't require so much. Do what needs to be done. Look after the kutis and the central area of the monastery. If you do, laypeople who come in and see it might even feel so inspired by religious emotion that they realize the Dhamma there and then. Don't you feel any sympathy for them? Think of how it is when you enter a mountain or a cave, how that feeling of religious emotion arises and the mind naturally inclines towards Dhamma.

## THINK ABOUT THE LAYPEOPLE

The Buddha made it clear in a number of his discourses that, while the merit accruing to those that make offerings to the Sangha depends to a large degree on the purity of their own intentions, it is also affected by the mindfulness and integrity of those monks who make use of them.

*Therefore, monks, stir up energy to gain what has not yet been gained, to attain that which has not yet been attained, to realize that which has not yet been realized [thinking]: ‘In this way our Going Forth will not be barren, but fruitful and fertile. So too, the alms-food, lodging, and medicinal requisites we use will bring those who have offered them great fruit and great benefit.’ Thus, monks, should you train yourselves. Perceiving one’s own benefit, monks, one should exert oneself heedfully. Perceiving the benefit to others, monks, one should exert oneself heedfully. Perceiving the benefit to both, monks, one should exert oneself heedfully.*

SN 12.22

When admonishing the Sangha, Luang Por constantly encouraged them to remember the sacrifices being made for them by the lay supporters and their duties towards them. Referring to an extravagant use of cloth he said:

If the laypeople were to see, just think how disheartened they’d be. ‘No matter how poor we are, whatever the hardships might be, we still manage to buy cloth to offer to the monks. But they’re living like kings. Really good cloth without a single tear in it is thrown away all over the place.’ They would lose all their faith.

He was not above a certain amount of emotional manipulation. In a culture in which demonstrating appreciation for the help one receives in life is given such emphasis, these kind of reminders were extremely powerful. Again and again, the message that he drummed into his disciples was: you are all living here supported by the faith and generosity of lay Buddhists. It is your responsibility to honour that faith by practising with sincerity. Not doing so is creating very bad kamma indeed.

## OPTIMUM CONSUMPTION

One of the most important skills monks at Wat Pah Pong were expected to develop in the first years of their training was the ability to judge ‘the right amount’ – not too much and not too little, the optimum amount – when consuming the requisites. Reflections on wise use of the requisites were included in the morning and evening chanting sessions to provide regular reminders. Too much of anything meant sensual indulgence and the accumulation of defilement; too little was a fruitless asceticism. The task was to find the golden mean. It wasn’t easy, and every now and again, junior monks could feel a sudden surge of resistance. If anything was likely to lead to a fierce Dhamma talk from Luang Por, it was heedless use of the requisites.

If the food left over in your bowl is enough to provide at least three or four laypeople with a meal, then things have gone too far. How is someone who has no sense of moderation going to understand how to train his mind? When you’re practising sitting meditation and your mind’s in a turmoil, where are you going to find the wisdom to pacify it? If you don’t even know basic things like how much food you need, what it means to take little, that’s really dire. Without knowing your limitations, you’ll be like the greedy fellow in the old story who tried to carry such a big log of wood out of the forest that he fell down dead from its weight.

How much is enough? Is this too much? Is this too little? These were questions that monks were to ask themselves constantly with regard to their use of the requisites. The ability to recognize the optimum amount in any situation and to keep to it, together with sense-restraint and wakefulness, were declared by the Buddha to be the three ‘*apāṇṇaka*’ or ‘always relevant’ virtues; and they were a favourite basis for Luang Por’s Dhamma talks to the Sangha.

## YOU AREN’T WHAT YOU EAT

Vegetarianism can be a vexed subject in Buddhist circles. In Theravada Buddhism, eating meat is considered unobjectionable as long as one has

not killed the animal oneself or played a direct part in its death. The Buddha did not forbid monks to eat meat<sup>\*</sup> dishes provided they were sure that no animal was killed specifically to provide those dishes for them. A key ideal of the mendicant lifestyle is that monks should be easy to look after, grateful for whatever they are offered and not fussy about food. If a layperson puts meat into a monk's bowl on alms-round, the monk is expected to accept it out of respect for the act of generosity; whether or not he eats it is up to him.

The Buddha considered vegetarianism in the Sangha to be a matter of personal choice and refused to make it compulsory. There is evidence in the Discourses that, on occasion, he himself consumed meat (most famously the pork dish that he accepted from the blacksmith Cunda, which was the immediate cause of his death). Luang Por adopted this even-handed stance towards vegetarianism. He himself ate meat as did most of his disciples.

In the 1980s, a sect appeared in Thailand which set great store by vegetarianism and sought to proselytize its views. It translated passages from Mahayana Buddhist polemics on meat eating and proclaimed that monks who ate meat were breaking their precepts. Some monks at Wat Pah Pong, influenced by these pamphlets, renounced eating meat. Subsequently, a certain amount of tension developed between those in the monastery who ate meat and those that did not. Luang Por was asked for his view. His chuckling reply was that neither group was more virtuous than the other; the difference between them was like that between frogs and toads:

If someone eats meat and attaches to its taste then that is craving.  
If someone who doesn't eat meat sees someone else eating it and feels averse and angry, abuses or criticizes them, and takes [what they see as] their badness into their own heart, then that makes them more foolish than the person they're angry with. They're also following craving.

<sup>\*</sup>Ten kinds of meat are prohibited: that of human beings, elephants, horses, dogs, snakes, lions, tigers, leopards, bears, and hyenas (Vin Mv.VI.23.9-15). Consumption of such meats was either socially unacceptable in the India of the Buddha's time, or else considered dangerous to the consumer (apparently the odour that would be emitted by his body would tell wild creatures that he was an enemy).

Luang Por said that monks were free to decide for themselves as to whether or not they ate meat; but whatever they decided, the most important point was that their actions be guided by Dhamma rather than attachment:

If you eat meat, then don't be greedy, don't indulge in its taste. Don't take life for the sake of food. If you're a vegetarian, don't attach to your practice. When you see people eating meat, don't get upset with them. Look after your mind. Don't attach to external actions. As far as the monks and novices in this monastery go, anyone who wants to take on the practice of abstaining from meat is free to, anyone who just wants to eat whatever is offered can do that. But don't quarrel. Don't look at each other in a cynical way. That's how I teach.

Liberation, he told them, was not dependent on what kind of food they put in their body. It was the result of the training of the mind.

Understand this: the true Dhamma is penetrated by wisdom. The correct path of practice is *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. If you restrain well the sense doors of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, you will be at peace and the wisdom that comprehends the nature of all conditions will arise. The mind will become disenchanted with all loveable and attractive things, and liberation will occur.

Regarding the debate as to whether the historical Buddha ate meat, he considered the whole argument to be based on a false premise:

In fact, the Buddha was neither a meat eater nor a vegetarian.

The Buddha was beyond these kinds of discrimination. As one completely beyond all defilement, it was incorrect to see him as a person who ate this or that kind of food. Ultimately, 'he was not anything at all', and merely took nourishment into his body at appropriate times.

On another occasion, Luang Por related a cautionary tale about a monk who took up vegetarianism unwisely:

Eventually, he couldn't manage it as he wished, and he decided that being a novice would be better than being a monk. He'd be able to gather leaves himself and prepare his own food. So, he disrobed and became a novice. Everything went as planned, but his defilements remained. He started thinking that being a novice meant that because he ate their rice, he was still dependent on other people; it was still problematic. He saw water buffaloes eating leaves and thought, 'Well, if a water buffalo can survive on leaves, so can I', without realizing the difference. So he gave up eating rice and ate only roots and leaves – seven or eight long *peka* pods at a go. But that wasn't the last of it. Now he started thinking, 'I've become a novice, and I'm still suffering. Maybe it would better to live as a postulant.' And so he disrobed. Now he has completely disappeared; that was the end of him.

#### IV. THE ASCETIC PRACTICES: ADDING INTENSITY

Mention has been made above of the thirteen *dhutaṅga* practices. These are the ascetic practices which the Buddha allowed his monks to adopt, if they wished, in order to intensify their practice. The *dhutaṅgas* were practices aimed at 'abrading' or 'wearing away' the defilements by creating situations in which they were provoked and directly opposed. By the standards of the day, they were mild in nature. Certainly, they paled beside the physical challenges that the Buddha undertook prior to finding the right way of practice that led to his enlightenment. Wearing only tree bark or owl wings, for example, he had practised standing continuously in the open for long periods, using a mattress of spikes, making his bed in charnel grounds with the bones of the dead for a pillow. In one of the most vivid passages in the Suttas, the Buddha described the extent to which he took the practice of fasting:

*Because of eating so little, my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems. Because of eating so little, my backside became like a camel's hoof. Because of eating so little, the projections on my spine stood forth like corded beads. Because of eating so little, my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn.*

*Because of eating so little, the gleam of my eyes sank far down into their sockets, looking like a gleam of water that has sunk far down in a deep well. Because of eating so little, my scalp shrivelled and withered as a green bitter gourd shrivels and withers in the wind and sun.*

MN 36

The Buddha-to-be's insight that however much pain lay in such asceticism there was no real gain, was a turning point on his path to enlightenment. He realized that it was, in fact, wisdom that freed the mind, and wisdom of a type that could not be developed in a weak, emaciated body. His rejection of prevailing modes of asceticism was a devastating one, because none of the proponents could accuse him of an opposition to it based on fear or lack of personal experience.

The 'abrasive' practices allowed by the Buddha did not emphasize feats of physical endurance based on the idea of erasing old kamma or of freeing the spirit from the prison of the body. They focused on exerting an intensified pressure on the attachments that condition suffering. The criteria for deciding whether a practice should be adopted or not was that it led to an increase in wholesome mental states and a decrease in unwholesome mental states. The Buddha praised those monks who took on these practices with the correct motivations: 'for the sake of fewness of desires, for the sake of contentment, for the sake of eliminating defilements, for the sake of solitude, for the sake of simplicity.' Although references to dhutaṅga practices are found in a number of places in the Buddha's Discourses<sup>\*</sup>, they were collected into a group of thirteen in *The Path of Purification* as follows:

#### *Section A: Concerning Robes*

1. Wearing rag-robies (*pāmsukūla*), i.e. robes made from cloth discarded on rubbish heaps or in cremation forests etc.
2. Wearing only three robes: the upper robe, the lower robe, and the outer robe.

<sup>\*</sup>viz. AN 5.181-90; Thag 16.7

### *Section B: Concerning Alms*

3. Going on a daily alms-round and subsisting on the food offered on it (not accepting supplementary food prepared in the monastery).
4. Accepting food from all houses without discrimination.
5. Eating one meal a day in one uninterrupted session.
6. Eating only from the alms-bowl.
7. Refusing extra food or second helpings after commencing the meal.

### *Section C: Concerning Dwelling Place*

8. Dwelling in a forest.
9. Dwelling at the foot of a tree.
10. Dwelling in the open air.
11. Dwelling in a cremation forest.
12. Dwelling in whatever place is allotted to him.

### *Section D: Concerning Posture*

13. Abstaining from lying down (*nesajjika*).

Adoption of the dhutaṅga practices was so much a vital part of the Isan Forest Tradition that its members often referred to themselves as ‘dhutaṅga meditation monks’. Four of the five practices of Section B above (practices [4]-[7]) were compulsory for all monks, as was acceptance of any dwelling allotted to them by the Sangha (practice [12]). Monasteries were established in forests, fulfilling practice [8] and often in cremation forests (practice [11]). These practices were all adopted by Luang Por when he established Wat Pah Pong. Of the remaining dhutaṅgas, Luang Por recommended monks undertake them as ways to intensify or revitalize their practice. When monks got into a rut and became depressed about their inability to overcome their weaknesses, dhutaṅga practices gave them new hope and energy. When monks became complacent or lost the edge to their practice, dhutaṅga practices brought up a new sense of commitment.

## LUANG POR SPEAKS ABOUT THE DHUTAÑGAS

Sometimes, your sīla and samādhi aren't enough. They're unable to kill the defilements; they don't know how. You need to introduce dhutaṅga practices to help. These abrasive practices are important; they scour away at the defilements; they help to cut off so many obstructions.



Try going to stay in a cremation forest. What is it like? Is it the same as living with the community? Right there – that's the benefit of the dhutaṅga practices.



These practices are difficult to accomplish because they are the observances of the Noble Ones. They are the practices undertaken by a person aiming to become one of the Noble Ones.



What distinguishes the dhutaṅga practices is that, initially at least, they are not particularly peaceful.

When practitioners who have defilements take on ascetic practices they are agitated by them – and that's the point. These are practices intended to bring things up. The Buddha was right: if your practice is cool and relaxed, then it's incorrect because there's no opposition, no conflict. These dhutaṅgas directly oppose the unenlightened mind.

When you take on the ascetic practices, you start to suffer because they counter the views and opinions of unenlightened people. A person without any wisdom won't want to bear it, 'I don't want to practise like this. I am practising to realize happiness and peace. I don't agree with practising in ways that make you suffer.' That person doesn't agree with eating in his bowl; he doesn't agree with living on alms-food and so on because they are all difficult things to do. Only one with wisdom and real faith will be determined to develop these practices.

But for the practitioner who has attained the Dhamma, then these thirteen ascetic practices are comfortable, peaceful and serene. At this stage, it's like a monkey and a human being. A human being walks into a forest and makes a commotion trampling over everything and destroying the peace. But a monkey let free in the forest finds it can move around easily and really enjoys it. The monkey likes the conditions because they suit the way it likes to live.

Dense, unenlightened people who are used to comfort – eating, sleeping and talking as they wish – really start to suffer when they have to come and live like this and practise in this way. But the Buddha taught that it's this very suffering which is Dhamma. It is the fruit of practice.

So why do you see the fruit first? Suffering arises because you don't see the cause. The suffering that arises is the Noble Truth of Suffering. It is a result. When suffering arises there is agitation, irritation and dislike. When the practitioner sees resultant suffering, then he must follow it up to see what it arises from and where.

#### RAG-ROBES

There had been periods in Luang Por's life when cloth had been in extremely short supply. At such times, he had made robes with cloth taken from corpses in cremation forests. The ceremonial cotton rope used to pull the hearse from the village to the forest provided him with thread. Luang Por once spoke of the benefits of wearing such robes:

We had to make all our own requisites. They may not have looked so good, but we were proud of them because they'd been produced by our own skill and effort. We'd sew robes by hand. By the time you'd finish, your thumb would be aching and swollen all over. There was no cotton other than the rope they used to draw hearses, and we'd go and look for it in cremation forests and then take it away and twist it into thread. The robes would be hardy and thick and heavy. Mostly we used *pāmsukūla* cloth,

cloth that had been wrapped around corpses and then tossed into the forest. There would be dried blood caked on it and pus stains, and it would stink to high heaven. You'd have to take it away and wash it clean and then boil it, put it out in the sun and then dye it with jackfruit dye.

When you put it on, you'd feel that it had great benefit because it would make your hair stand on end and you'd be thrilled through and through; you'd feel a constant sense of dread. It made you diligent: diligent to practise sitting and walking meditation throughout the night without drowsiness, not wanting to sleep because of the fear, feeling stimulated and apprehensive. This kind of ascetic practice is useful; it wears away the defilements.

On one occasion, while following Luang Pu Mun on alms-round, Luang Por Lee recounts how they came across an old pair of trousers thrown away by the side of the road. He described feeling much surprised when Luang Pu Mun started to kick the trousers along in front of him:

“Finally, when he reached the fence around the police station, he stooped down, picked up the trousers and fastened them under his robes. I was puzzled. What did he want with old trash like that?

“When we got back to the kuti, he placed the trousers over the clothes railing ... Several days later, I saw that the old pair of trousers had become a shoulder bag and a belt, hanging together on the wall. And a few days afterwards, he gave them to me to use. They were nothing but stitches and patches.”

#### FOOD, INGLORIOUS FOOD

All the monastics at Wat Pah Pong – monks, novices and maechees – were expected to keep the dhutaṅga practices of eating only once a day from a single vessel. Everything – rice, curries, salad greens, fruit, sweets – had to go into the alms-bowl. No food could be placed in the bowl lid.\* No

\*Occasionally, on important Buddhist holidays, this practice might be relaxed. Small bowls of noodle soup or, in later days, ice cream, that were offered at such times did not have to be tipped into the bowl with the rest of the food. It was considered a special treat.

individual side-dishes were permitted. Luang Por reminded his disciples that all the different foods would soon be mixed up in the stomach anyway – so what was the problem?

For junior monks and novices, the natural hunger for food arising after a twenty-four hour fast, compounded by the sensual desire for tasty food, and the fear of not getting enough to sustain the body for the next day, could be a heady mix. It was an excellent opportunity to face up to greed and attachment. It was also the most stressful part of the day.

For the hour or so before the 8.00 a.m. daily meal offering, the monks were expected to sit in meditation at their allotted places in the dining hall. For many, it was a difficult time. They had been up since 3.00 a.m., had not eaten since the previous morning, and had just returned from a long walk. Drowsiness, especially in the hot season, was a common foe. Desire for food agitated many minds. But if anyone lingered outside the hall and indulged in hushed conversation to pass the time, the sound of Luang Por clearing his throat, was likely to be heard. It was a sound that would make the words die in their throats – ‘That sound had a great power to it’, said one monk, ‘It was like the roar of a tiger, and it terrified us.’

All food gathered on alms-round was considered to belong to the Sangha rather than the individual monk who had received it. On return to the monastery, monks would empty out their bowls, keeping only a ball of sticky rice for themselves. The rest of the food was sent to the kitchen where it was sorted and added to the side-dishes being prepared there.

During periods when food was scarce, newly ordained monks could sometimes find it hard to have to relinquish items that they had gathered themselves. It seemed unfair to some that when the food was distributed, ‘their’ item would rarely reach them at the end of the line. One particular monk took to concealing food inside his rice ball. One day he received a hard-boiled egg on almsround and instead of sending it to the kitchen he moulded his sticky rice ball around it. It so happened that on that particular day, Luang Por walked down the line checking the size of the monks’ rice balls. When he reached the devious monk’s bowl he stopped. The rice ball had cracked open revealing the boiled egg hidden within it. Luang Por said:

Whose ball of rice has laid an egg?

All eyes turned towards the monk, who was now sickly white with fear and embarrassment and beginning to shake. Luang Por did not say another word but silently walked back to his seat. Monks who were present at the time said that nobody ever tried the trick again.

On one occasion, Luang Por exhorted the Sangha:

We haven't come here to practice for the sake of food. We haven't come here to eat and sleep. We have entered the Sangha in order to practise the Buddha's teachings. If all you want is to live comfortably and eat well, then it would be better if you weren't a monk. You can do that as a layman; you don't have to enter the monastic order. If you want to get something or do something or eat something, then you can just go ahead. It's more convenient out there, you can be more comfortable, you can eat better. But if you consider it well, you'll see that it's a path that ends in tears. We've come here to follow the Buddha's teachings. We've come because of our respect for the Buddha. If you think like that, the Sangha will live in harmony, and there will be no contention among you.

A popular practice adopted by many monks during the Rains Retreat entailed only eating food obtained on almsround and refusing all the side dishes prepared in the monastery kitchen. Luang Por explained why it was not the norm in the monastery, and why he allowed supplementary dishes to be prepared:

Some groups of monks go into the forest and keep the ascetic practice of only eating food offered on alms-round. But the only one who benefits from it is the most senior of them. On alms-round there are one or two items of food offered to go with the rice, not enough to go around, and they go into the bowls of the monks first in line. The teacher does well in that kind of ascetic practice. He can just carry his bowl off and have a good meal, while everyone else suffers. Laypeople want to offer their food to the Ajahn, and so the novice at the end of the line goes without.

Our way of doing things here is meant to ensure that everything is shared equally.

#### AT THE FOOT OF A TREE

Luang Por cautioned his disciples to avoid letting ideas of ownership arise with regard to their kutis, even if they had lived in them for a number of years. Kutis were Sangha residences, and Luang Por taught the monks that they must always look upon themselves as temporary occupants. When newly arrived in the monastery, monks were expected to keep the ascetic practice of accepting with good grace whatever kuti was allotted them, whether it suited them or not. When they left the monastery for more than a few days, even with the expectation of returning, they would be expected to remove all of their possessions from their kuti and make it available for others. On their return, they would have to accept whatever kuti might be available. If their old kuti was still empty, they might move back in. If not, they would have to live elsewhere.

Once the rains had stopped, the forest floor had dried out, and the first cool winds of the cold season had arrived, Luang Por would tell the monks to move down out of their kutis and put up their glots in the forest. It was the period of the year for practising the dhutaṅga practice of living at the foot of a tree. During this time, he would also send a few of the monks off to stay in nearby cremation forests, while those with more than five years seniority might ask to leave on tudong.

Living under their glots in the forest provided a means by which monks could check to see if they had become attached to basic comforts and the sense of safety they derived from their kutis. The kutis at Wat Pah Pong were mostly simple wooden huts without furniture of any kind; but being raised on stilts they caught the breeze and offered protection from snakes, scorpions and centipedes. Living at the foot of a tree was inconvenient and demanded a great deal of patience. But it was usually the irritating ants, termites and mosquitoes that disturbed the monks rather than the more dangerous creatures. At the foot of a tree, monks felt themselves vulnerable. At night-time, they became sensitive to the slightest sound around them. They were naturally alert. It was a state conducive to the

development of meditation and good preparation for a future experience of a tudong walk.

#### NO LYING DOWN

The thirteenth ascetic practice is aimed at developing energy. A monk who undertakes it determines not to lie down for a certain period: perhaps two weeks, perhaps a month or even three months. Some monks keep the practice for a number of years. Those who undertake this practice sleep sitting up. They may determine at what level of strictness they want to practice: whether or not, for example, they will allow themselves to sit leaning against a wall.

At Wat Pah Pong, this ascetic practice was compulsory for the whole Sangha on every Observance Day – the half, full and dark moon days (approximately once a week). Although it was not a common undertaking, even in forest monasteries, Luang Por made not lying down (*nesajjika*) a signature practice. He saw great value in having his disciples push themselves beyond their comfort zone in this way. Each Observance Day, from seven in the evening until the following dawn, there would be a programme of chanting, meditation and Dhamma teaching. Luang Por would usually give a talk lasting some two or three hours, and then he would sit meditating in the hall right through the night as an example. He encouraged the Sangha:

If you can't manage it today, then you must achieve it on another day. Even if you don't make it cleanly or purely – you're drowsy or lose your mindfulness at times – at least don't lay down. It doesn't matter if you doze off while you're practising sitting, walking or standing meditation; it doesn't matter how drowsy you get – that's all quite natural. But please put a special amount of patience and effort and sincerity into your practice.

#### EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Any monks wishing to take on an ascetic practice had first to receive permission from Luang Por. Sometimes they asked to undertake practices

not found in the classic list. Amongst these, fasting and taking a vow of silence were the most popular.

Keeping silence was not a practice praised by the Buddha. Indeed, he forbade whole communities from taking vows of silence as he saw it as an obstacle to the development of Right Speech and to the governance of the Sangha. But there have always been Buddhist monks who have seen periods of silence as helping them to take a step back from unskilful habits of speech they have acquired and to become more aware of the intentions behind their words. They have valued the way that abstaining from speech also reduces the noise in the mind and turns the mind inwards. If Luang Por was convinced that the practice was appropriate for the monk wishing to undertake it and would lead to a strengthening of his meditation, then he would consent. During the Rains Retreat, Luang Por would sometimes make a period of silence compulsory for the whole Sangha, explaining that, as he was making himself exempt, the Vinaya rule prohibiting the practice was not transgressed.

The Buddha rejected fasting as a means of purifying the mind. He marked his abandonment of the tenets of the ascetic movements of his time by accepting a nourishing bowl of milk-rice from the milkmaid Sujāta. But although the Buddha stressed frugality, moderation and sense-restraint while eating, he did not forbid fasting altogether. In Wat Pah Pong, many monks experimented with it. Fasting, used wisely, can be a powerful tool for exposing attachments to sensuality and the body and to the fear of death. It is considered to be particularly helpful for giving monks assailed by lust at least a temporary respite from sexual desire. At best, it can give them an opportunity to rebuild their samādhi and gain a fresh perspective on their craving. For many monks, an occasional fast provides a break from alms-round and the daily meal offering – a few extra hours of solitude.

Luang Por allowed some monks to fast and forbade others. He emphasized understanding the intention to fast. His advice on this issue tended to vary according to time, place and person. If, for instance, a monk asked permission to fast and Luang Por saw that he had an unwise attitude – he wanted to do something special to distract from his inability or unwillingness to do the ordinary things; or he wanted to make a name for

himself amongst his peers – then Luang Por would be discouraging. But on other occasions, if he felt that a period of fasting would be of benefit to a particular individual in developing patience or opposing defilement, then he would give permission. He pointed out the lack of continuity it sometimes entailed and how unwise renunciation could boomerang into unwise indulgence:

[The value of fasting] depends on the individual. It's difficult to lay down a definite rule about it ... but putting everything into the practice doesn't mean exhausting yourself. It's about finding 'just the right amount', keeping the mind in balance ... Some people can fast for fifteen days and spend the whole time doing walking meditation. But then when they eat, they can knock off five plates of greens and as much rice as they can get their hands on. That's so excessive it's amazing. But not in a good way.

He would remind his disciples that taking on such practices could be a good experience, but that it was the middle path that led to awakening:

You might be able to walk or float through the air and it wouldn't be anything to do with practice. You could eat only seven mouthfuls of food every day and it wouldn't be practice, because it's not 'the right amount'. These things don't lead to enlightenment ... Practice is a matter of being content and of few wishes – but enough wishes to keep you going. If you're a little bit hungry, your mind is easy to teach; but if you're really hungry, then it's difficult to teach: it's dull. Eat just enough to stay healthy.

Luang Por would also comment that reducing food intake to a minimum was a more effective boost to training the mind:

It's like an elephant in a bamboo grove. If you want to ride on its neck, then you have to capture it and put a harness on it. Once it's chained, then you give it something to eat, but not much. The elephant becomes fearful and hungry, and then, after a while, when it starts to lose weight, it lets you teach and train it. That's how you domesticate a wild elephant. Once it's trained, you can let it go free, even into the market. Train yourself in the same way.

On occasion, however, he would explain how the experience of fasting stood monks in good stead if they found themselves in remote areas with no village to provide alms-food and a long trek ahead of them. They were able to bear up because they knew what doing without food does to the body and mind. Those without such experience were more likely to be overcome by fear.

Luang Por had experimented with fasting himself. Sometimes he related his own observations to his disciples:

Sometimes, after fasting for three or four days you feel weary. The late afternoon is a crucial time and you almost give up, but then at night time you get another surge of energy from the coolness. The second phase is important as well – when to break your fast. It's extremely difficult to decide on this point. You think, 'Shall I keep going a bit longer? Or is this enough?' Your mind is thrown into disarray. Sometimes, you look at your bowl and then you want to go on alms-round. 'If I don't go for another two or three days, will I be able to make it?' And then your mind is off again and back to the question of: 'Shall I go or shan't I?' It's a difficult, troublesome time until you decide. 'If I die, I die! I'm not going on alms-round today.' And then you immediately feel stronger, and your weariness dissolves once more. That's how the practice is established; it's dependent on unwavering patience.

More than a week has passed and you still don't feel hungry. You feel fine. You feel as if you could live without eating for an indefinite period – until death, if need be. Just one big stride and you'd be out of all this. It's at this point that you need to be careful – very careful.

You look at the other monks and novices and it seems as if the whole wat is so busy. First thing in the morning they have to go on alms-round, and before long, they have to put food in their bodies; and not long after that, they have to empty it all out again. The next morning, they have to stuff more in, and then before long, they have to empty it out again and go out for more. 'They're crazy! We're all such slaves of craving and defilements.'

At this point, some people decide to give up eating altogether; they think they'd be better off dead. This is a crucial moment. You see eating as a trivial matter. But such thoughts are too elevated. And it's an elevation that's upside down; it ends in derangement. You start blaming rice and fish. Rice grains start to look like maggots. You don't want any to go into your bowl.

Luang Por repeated that meditators who deliberately pitted themselves against natural impulses under controlled conditions, could gain many insights. But constant vigilance was necessary to prevent them from falling prey to the pitfalls attendant on such practices. It was Right View that kept everything on track.

In summary, the *Pātimokkha* training rules, the observances and the ascetic practices dovetailed to create the distinctive features of monastic life at Wat Pah Pong. They were fundamental to the sense of community, of a shared culture and identity. But if Vinaya was the lifeblood of the monks' existence, it was meditation that was its beating heart.





# VI

*the heart of the matter*

*Good is the tamed mind; the mind that has been tamed brings true happiness.*

*Dhp 35*

# *The Heart of the Matter*

## *Meditation Teachings*

*What can be done for his disciples by a Master who seeks their welfare and has compassion and pity on them, that I have done for you, monks. There are these roots of trees, there are empty places. Meditate monks, do not delay, lest you later regret it. This is my message to you.*

MN 19

### I. NUTS AND BOLTS

#### A THREEFOLD TRAINING

The Buddha declared that all of his teachings could be resolved into two categories: those revealing the nature of human suffering and those that deal with the cessation of that suffering. He taught that true liberation can only be brought about by cultivation of the Noble Eightfold Path, a comprehensive and integrated training or education of body, speech and mind. The ultimate freedom from suffering, realized through a clear vision of the true nature of things, occurs when all eight factors of that path are brought in unison to maturity.

Formal meditation practice – that is to say, the application of specific mind training exercises, usually in the sitting or walking postures – lies at the heart of the Eightfold Path. Nevertheless, it is only truly effective as a means to liberation when cultivated in conjunction with the other path

factors. This principle of the holistic nature of the path was fundamental to Luang Por Chah's meditation teachings.

Luang Por preferred to speak about cultivation of the path in terms of the 'threefold training', a convention by which the eight constituent factors are resolved into three related spheres of practice: *Sīla* (consisting of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood); *Samādhi* (an umbrella term for the training of the mind consisting of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration); and *Paññā* (consisting of Right View and Right Resolve).

To Luang Por, *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* were different aspects of the same process, divided into three because, at any moment, one of them would take centre stage while the other two offered essential background support. In one analogy, he said the three combined to improve the mind, as a combination of spices enhanced a delicious curry. Correct practice of these three aspects of the path leads, he said, to a Dhamma practice which is 'beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle and beautiful in the end'.

Meditation at Wat Pah Pong was fully embedded in a way of life designed to minimize the impediments to growth in Dhamma and maximize the supporting conditions. Meditators were celibate. They practised in a forest, secluded from coarser sense impingement, under the guidance of a master and with the support of a community of like-minded friends. The emphasis on such virtues as wise shame and wise fear of consequences, sense-restraint, contentment with little, patience and mindfulness in all postures created the foundations underlying the inner transformation for which meditation practice was to be the catalyst.

Given the Buddha's famous utterance, 'Mind is chief, mind is the fore-runner of all things', it might seem sufficient for meditators to focus all their attention on the mind itself. But Luang Por disagreed with the view that simply by training the mind in meditation, appropriate actions and speech would naturally follow:

It's not possible to simply train the mind, neglecting actions and speech. These things are connected. Practising with the mind until it's smooth, refined and beautiful is similar to producing a

finished wooden pillar or plank: before you can obtain a pillar that is smooth, varnished and attractive, you must first go and cut a tree down. Then you must cut off the rough parts – the roots and branches – before you split it, saw it and work it. Practising with the mind is the same as working with the tree, you have to work with the coarse things first. You have to destroy the rough parts – destroy the roots, destroy the bark and everything which is unattractive – in order to obtain that which is attractive and pleasing to the eye. You have to work through the rough to reach the smooth.

Restraint within voluntarily adopted boundaries for action and speech, – ‘watching over body and speech’, as Luang Por would put it – also requires an inner training. Meditators must be constantly aware of whether or not the volitional impulses behind their behaviour are tainted with defilement. Luang Por said that keeping sila required catching the outlaw and making him into the village headman. The mind with the intention to transgress must be persuaded to become the mind with the intention not to transgress.

You must sustain awareness at every moment and in every posture, whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down. Before you perform any action, speak or engage in conversation, first establish your awareness.



Practise like this until you are fluent. Practise so that you can keep abreast of what’s going on in the mind. Practise to the point at which mindfulness becomes effortless, and you are mindful before you act, mindful before you speak.

On the initial level of sila, samādhi manifests as the consistent, unshakeable determination to refrain from breaking any of the precepts, and by an unwavering mindfulness and restraint. As a result, the mind is able to reflect upon experience as right or wrong, wholesome or unwholesome. It is aware of sense experience and is able to investigate inner reactions of like and dislike to that experience. The wisdom faculty is now starting to manifest.

The aspect of the mind which identifies and chooses the good from the bad, the right from the wrong, amongst all the mind-objects within your field of awareness, is a nascent form of paññā.

The threefold training at this point is still quite coarse, but ‘it’s on the refined side of coarseness’.

The coconut palm absorbs the water from the earth and pulls it up through the trunk. By the time the water reaches the coconut itself, it has become clean and sweet, even though it is derived from that plain water in the ground. The coconut palm is nourished by what are essentially the coarse earth and water elements – which it absorbs and purifies – and these are transformed into something far sweeter and purer than before. In the same way, the practice of sīla, samādhi and paññā – in other words, *magga*, the Path – has coarse beginnings, but, as a result of training and refining the mind through meditation and reflection, it becomes increasingly subtle.



Put simply, when sīla, samādhi and paññā mature, they form the one true path.

#### A BASE OF MERIT

Luang Por taught lay meditators that although they were unable to enjoy all the conditions conducive to meditation practice provided by monastic life, they were to give the same attention to an overall cultivation of the threefold training – one that reduced obstacles to Dhamma practice as much as possible and encouraged supporting factors. Everything began with generosity: giving material things created a familiarity with the letting go of selfishness and possessiveness that would stand meditators in good stead when seeking to let go of increasingly subtle levels of attachment during meditation.

Performing acts of generosity is a kind of *toraman*, that is, training the mind by countering its desires.

He gave an example of a person with two apples who decides to give one to a friend but realizes that he wants to keep the larger one for himself. A Dhamma practitioner would overcome his selfish thoughts and give away the larger.

If you dare decide to give away the big apple, you feel a twinge of grief, but once you've made the decision, the grief is gone. This is disciplining the mind in the correct way and achieving a victory over yourself.

Giving *dāna* – giving happiness to others – is a way of cleansing what is soiled within. You need a warm, kind and benevolent heart. This is something to reflect on. Generosity is the first thing that needs to be maintained in your mind.

Meditators were encouraged to develop new skilful habits by recognizing and consistently turning away from the unskilful habits they had accumulated.

Defilements are like a cat. If you spoil a cat, then it will come around all the time. But suppose one day it starts rubbing up against your leg, and you don't feed it. It will miaow angrily, but if you refuse to give it any food, within a day or two, you won't see it anymore. It's the same with defilements. If you don't follow them, then before long they won't come to disturb you anymore – and from then on, you'll be at peace. Make the defilements afraid of you; don't make yourself afraid of defilements.

Keeping the Five Precepts was a minimum requirement for those serious about making progress in Dhamma practice. By not keeping them, would-be meditators made bad kamma, threatened their most important relationships and created the conditions for regret, guilt and self-aversion that would fatally undermine their practice.

When your *sila* is pure, when you're kind to others and you treat them honestly, then you feel happy. There's no remorse in your mind. When, through not harming others, you feel no remorse, then you're already in a heaven realm. Physically and mentally you're at ease. Whether you eat or sleep, you feel at ease, you're

happy. Happiness is born of sila. Certain actions have certain results. The abandonment of evil through keeping precepts leads, by a natural law, to the arising of goodness.

Acts of generosity and a firm commitment to sila created the basic sense of well-being and self-respect necessary for progress in meditation. But it was also necessary to develop the ability to reflect upon experience. Without it, satisfaction with those positive states of mind might inhibit rather than promote more profound spiritual development.

If we're happy, we tend to get heedless; we don't want to go any further. We attach to that happiness. We like it; it's heaven, and we're the deities. It's easeful, and we live in blissful ignorance. So, reflect on happiness but don't be deluded by it. Reflect on the drawbacks of happiness: that it's unstable, doesn't stay with us for long, and once gone, suffering resumes and the tears return.

Luang Por cautioned that, in the long-term, meditation practices would only fulfil their potential if meditators cultivated a spirit of renunciation through reflecting on the drawbacks of all conditioned phenomena – even the most refined and easeful. They had to clearly see the inadequacy of any stopgap, contingent solution to suffering. They needed to recognize that as long as even subtle defilements remained in the mind, there could be no true peace and contentment. And it was only through pursuing Dhamma practice to its conclusion that defilements could be completely eliminated.

Dwelling on the necessity to follow the path to its end furnishes meditators with the enthusiasm and commitment to devote themselves to meditation through the ups and downs, the thick and thins of practice. Without cultivating the spirit of renunciation, meditators tend to grasp on to the initial fruits of meditation that appear as the coarser defilements are attenuated. Rather than striving for complete liberation from all attachment, they settle for what Luang Por called the 'thin-skinned' peace of elevated states of mind:

Look deeply. What is the present state of your mind? Simply stay with that awareness. If you keep that up, you will have a foundation; you will have mindfulness and alertness whether

standing, walking, sitting or lying down. If you see anything coming up, then just let it be, don't attach to it. Liking and disliking, pleasure and pain, doubts and faith are all just the mind commentating upon and reflecting on its experience. Examine its results. Don't put labels on things. Know what they are; see everything that arises in the mind as merely a mental state, something impermanent that, having arisen, persists for a while and then ceases. Things are merely processes; there's no self, no real separation between others and ourselves, there's nothing that should be clung to.

## TECHNIQUE

There is no specific 'Ajahn Chah meditation technique'. For him, the important question to be asked about a particular means of training the mind was: what results does it give? He accepted any method that incorporated the cultivation of mindfulness, alertness and appropriate effort; that served to take a meditator beyond the hindrances; and that led to a samādhi which could provide a foundation for insight into 'the way things are'. Whatever path of meditation leads to letting go and non-attachment, he would say, is a correct method.

Luang Por taught that it was important that meditators used a technique that was compatible with their character. By this he did not mean that there was a particular technique specific to each person, the adoption of which would ensure success. A sense of affinity with a meditation method (he once described it as similar to an affinity with a particular food), would not make meditation smooth and easy, but it would make it workable. An incompatible technique with which the meditator felt no sense of connection or enthusiasm, on the other hand, could lead to discouragement and regress. Meditators should not switch from one method to another too easily. Only after persevering with a method for a reasonable period of time should they conclude whether or not to make a change.

But although Luang Por acknowledged the validity of a number of methods, there were some which he emphasized:

Mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*) means setting right your thoughts and opinions. Its aim is letting go [of defilements]. The various methods are like different kinds of fish traps. They differ in form, but ultimately, they all share the same purpose. So here, although I don't insist upon a particular form of meditation, I usually teach people to focus on the word 'Buddho' or on the breath for a sufficient period, and then to gradually deepen their knowledge and view of the way things are.

Luang Por referred to mindfulness of breathing as the crown jewel of meditation techniques. He gave various reasons for encouraging its development, beginning with the observation that it is an uncomplicated practice and convenient. The breath is naturally present at all times and in all postures. It can be turned to at any moment. It may be practised by meditators of all character types. It has been the pre-eminent technique since the first days of the *Sāsana*. The Buddha and many of his great disciples made use of this technique, and it has been praised by meditation masters through the ages. Luang Por himself used this method, and he asserted that through the practice of mindfulness of breathing, the meditator could fulfil the whole of the threefold training:

Compelling the mind to focus on the breath is *sīla*; the unremitting focus on the breath, bringing the mind to a state of lucid calm, is called *samādhi*; letting go of attachment through contemplation of the focused breath as impermanent, unstable and selfless is called *paññā*.

Therefore, the practice of mindfulness of breathing can be said to be the development of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. Someone practising it can be taken to be following the Eightfold Path, which the Buddha taught was the foremost, the most excellent of all paths, as it leads towards Nibbāna. If you follow in the way I've described, then that may be considered realizing the Buddha-Dhamma in the most authentic possible way.

## BUDDHO

In order to help meditators anchor their mind on the breath, Luang Por recommended using the mantra ‘Buddho’, mentally reciting ‘Bud’ on the inhalation and ‘dho’ on the exhalation.\* As one meaning of the word ‘Buddha’ (or ‘Buddho’) is the undeluded knowing of the way things are, meditators employing this method are essentially repeating, again and again, the name of the awareness they are seeking to cultivate. Occasionally returning to the meaning of the mantra during meditation prevents the practice from becoming mechanical.

Meditate reciting ‘Buddho’, ‘Buddho’ until it penetrates deep into your heart. The word ‘Buddho’ represents the awareness and wisdom of the Buddha. In practice, you must depend on this word more than anything else. The awareness it brings will lead you to understand the truth about your own mind. It is a true refuge as it includes both mindfulness and insight ...

When your mind is consciously applied to an object, it wakes up. The awareness wakes it up. Once this knowing has arisen through meditation, you can see the mind clearly. As long as the mind remains without the awareness of Buddho, even if there is an ordinary worldly presence of mind, it will not lead you to what is truly beneficial.

*Sati* or mindfulness depends on the presence of ‘Buddho’ – the knowing. It must be a clear knowing, which leads to the mind becoming brighter and more radiant. The illuminating effect that this clear knowing has on the mind is similar to the brightening of a light in a darkened room.\*\* As long as the room is pitch black, any objects placed inside remain difficult to distinguish or else completely obscured from view. But as you begin intensifying the brightness of the light inside, it will penetrate throughout the whole room, enabling you to see more clearly from moment

\*‘Buddho’ is the nominative case of the word usually expressed in the vocative as ‘Buddha’. The long ‘o’ provided by this form of the word is more easily sustained for the duration of an exhalation than the short ‘a’. Inner recitation of ‘Buddho’ can also be practised without reference to the breath.

\*\*Presumably a reference to kerosene lanterns.

to moment, thus allowing you to know more and more the details of any object inside.

When the knowing of the breath had become clear and stable, when what he called the ‘Buddha knowing’ had become established, Luang Por said the mantra could be discarded. It had served its purpose.

Meditators who felt no affinity with breath meditation at all were encouraged to cultivate more discursive meditations\* such as the recollection of death or contemplation of the body – specifically the five basic meditation topics of head hair, body hair, nails, teeth and skin. In the latter, meditators could focus on the unattractive (*asubha*) aspects of these body parts, or on their empty, impermanent nature by considering them in terms of their constituent elements of earth (hardness), water (cohesion or fluidity), fire (heat) and air (motion). Pali names for the five body parts – *kesā*, *lomā*, *nakhā*, *dantā*, *taco* – could be internally recited as mantras to keep the mind on track. Visualization could be employed to enhance the contemplation.

Luang Por would encourage monastics cultivating mindfulness of breathing as their main practice to develop meditation on the body as an auxiliary technique. He reminded them that its importance could be seen from the fact that it was included in the novice Ordination ceremony. Furthermore, as the first level of liberation (stream-entry) was reached by the abandonment of ‘*sakkāyaditṭhi*’, or personality view, and the identification with the physical body constituted the most powerful and immediate expression of that ‘fetter’\*\*, then body contemplation was of immense value.

You must repeatedly investigate the body and break it down into its component parts. As you see each part as it truly is, the perception of the body being a solid entity or self is gradually eroded away. You have to keep putting continuous effort into this investigation of the truth, without pause.

\*Meditations which make use of directed thought.

\*\*See Glossary, 807

Practise contemplating the body as being ‘just that much’, until it is quite natural to think to yourself, ‘Oh, the body is merely the body. It’s just that much.’ Once this way of reflection is established, as soon as you say to yourself that, ‘it’s just that much’, the mind lets go. There is letting go of attachment to the body. There is the insight that sees the body as merely the body. By sustaining this sense of detachment through continuous seeing of the body as merely a body, all doubt and uncertainty is gradually uprooted. As you investigate the body, the more clearly you see it as just a body, rather than as a ‘person’, a ‘being’, a ‘me’ or a ‘he’ or ‘she’.

#### THE SINGLE CHAIR

Meditation practices that involve directing the thinking mind, rather than turning away from it, are based on the principle that sustaining an unbroken stream of awareness on a theme of contemplation, instead of a physical sensation, can also lead to a gathering of the mind’s forces. This produces a rapture that takes the mind beyond the pull of worldly thoughts and desires to a samādhi that provides the platform for the profound work of wisdom.

But whatever meditation practice was adopted, Luang Por emphasized that mindfulness must play a central role. He compared watching the mind with mindfulness and alertness, to a shop keeper keeping a sharp eye on his goods when a group of mischievous children come into his shop. In another simile, he said that the mind is like a room with a single chair. When mindfulness sits firmly on that seat facing the door, then any guest entering the room is known immediately. Without a chair to sit on, no guest stays for long.

Mindfulness, bolstered by confidence in the Buddha’s path to liberation and by Right Effort, resulted in a samādhi that bore within it the seeds of wisdom and liberation.

Mindfulness is the nurse and protector of samādhi. It is the dhamma which allows all other wholesome dharmas to arise in balance and harmony. Mindfulness is life. At any moment that

you lack mindfulness, it is as if you are dead. Lack of mindfulness is called heedlessness, and it robs your words and actions of all meaning. Whatever form of recollection mindfulness takes, it gives rise to self-awareness, wisdom, all kinds of good qualities.

Any dhamma which lacks mindfulness is incomplete. Mindfulness is what governs standing, walking, sitting and lying down. It's not only during sitting meditation that mindfulness is required; outside of formal meditation periods you must have a constant mindfulness and alertness and give care and attention to your actions. If you do that, a sense of wise shame will arise. You'll feel ashamed of improper actions or speech. As the sense of shame becomes stronger, then so will restraint. With strong restraint, there is no heedlessness.

Wherever you go, mindfulness must be present. The Buddha said, 'Practise mindfulness a great deal, develop it a great deal.' Mindfulness is the dhamma that will guard over your past and present actions and those that you are about to perform. It is of great benefit to you. Know yourself at every moment and then you will have a constant sense of right and wrong. That awareness of the rightness or wrongness of everything that occurs in your mind will arouse a sense of wise shame, and you will refrain from acting in bad or mistaken ways.

#### A MEDITATION INSTRUCTION

Attention to the finer details of the sitting posture has never been a prominent feature of the Theravada meditation tradition. Very few forest monks sit in full lotus with each foot upturned on the opposite thigh, or fold their hands in a perfect mudra\*. The basic instructions are simply to establish a posture that is stable and erect, with the main criterion being that the posture be one in which the meditator can sit for a reasonably long time with the minimum of unnecessary discomfort. Luang Por treated posture as a straightforward matter. At the beginning of a

\*For example, with the hands folded in the lap and each thumb lightly touching.

meditation session, he would simply give instructions to take the cross-legged posture \*, place the right leg on the left, the right hand on the left \*\*, keep the back straight, make oneself comfortable – not too tense and not too relaxed – and close the eyes.

Having paid homage to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, meditators either turned to their main meditation object or began with a preliminary practice. Luang Por sometimes suggested going through the thirty-two parts of the body \*\*\* before turning to the breath. Apart from being a good mindfulness practice in itself, this reinforced skilful perceptions of the body that could then be taken up for deeper investigation when the mind had been strengthened by samādhi. Luang Por also taught less experienced meditators to follow the breath in and out of the body for a certain period before focusing on one particular point, such as the tip of the nose:

Focus your mindfulness so that it follows the breath entering your body and leaving it. Follow the beginning of the breath, the middle of the breath, the end of the breath. With mindfulness, keep the breath in mind; and with alertness, be aware that right now you are breathing. On the inhalation, the beginning of the breath is at the nose tip, the middle at the heart and the end at the abdomen. On the exhalation, the beginning of the breath lies at the abdomen, the middle at the heart and the end at the tip of the nose. Focus on these three points.

The mind, your awareness, has no time to sneak off and take hold of other objects because it's preoccupied with being aware, right here, of both the inhalation and the exhalation. If the mind goes off in search of other objects, it shows that mindfulness has slipped. Establish it again. Be aware of exactly where the

\* Meditators generally sat flat on the floor. Luang Por did not however object to the introduction of meditation cushions at Wat Pah Nanachat, the branch monastery he established for his Western disciples.

\*\* The preference for right over left here is simply a tradition that has been passed down from forest monks of previous generations. Conceivably, it originated in some consideration of internal energy flows, but Luang Por never spoke in such terms.

\*\*\* See Glossary, 823.

breath is passing at each moment. Keep looking. Sometimes your mind runs off for a long time without you being aware of it. Suddenly you realize that mindfulness has been lost again. Start afresh. If you practise in this way, then you will develop a good working knowledge of the beginning, middle and end of the breath. After you've trained in this way for a sufficient time, mindfulness will be constantly present on the inhalation and the exhalation. There will be mindfulness at the beginning of the breath, its middle and end.

Initially, you will have a few difficulties. But later, as you become more experienced, it will no longer be necessary to follow the breath in and out. Now anchor the awareness at the tip of your nose. Stop right there and note whether the breath is long or short, be aware of the inhalation and the exhalation at that point. When you first start to practice sitting meditation, give this method a try.

When you're concentrating on the breath, there's no need to force it. It's similar to learning how to use a pedal sewing machine. To sew properly you need to find a rhythm between your hand and foot. So when you're first learning to use a sewing machine, what do you do? You practise pedalling freely without sewing anything. Once you can pedal fluently, then you start on some cloth.

Your breath is the same, there's no need to make it a certain way; it doesn't matter whether it's long or short provided that it feels comfortable ... If the breath is too long or too short or too strong, don't force it, allow it to find its own balance. All you have to do is focus on the inhalation and the exhalation. You don't have to contemplate anything else. It's enough to be aware of the breath.

When you do this, certain thoughts will arise, 'What's the use of this?' and so on. Keep going. Don't get caught in doubts. There's no need to answer them. There's no need to think. It's not your job. Your job is simply to be aware of the breath as it enters and leaves the body. You don't want to see deities or Brahma gods,

but you want to see the breath. It is sufficient merely that you don't forget the breath. Understand and then cut off the various objects that pass in and out of awareness, and let them go.

Thoughts and moods are changeful. Perhaps when you start sitting you begin to feel homesick, and the mind starts proliferating about this matter and that. The moment you start thinking of home, then remind yourself, 'It's changeful (*mai nae*)!' Fond thoughts of home are impermanent and so are negative ones. You can't believe any of it. Your mind lies to you. You have to assert this changeful nature of things. Sometimes you hate this person and that, but it doesn't last. Sometimes you love this person and that, but it doesn't last either. Pin the mind down right there and where can it go? When you hate someone, you fabricate a certain image of them. When you love someone, you do the same. The mind starts to suffer. Sometimes you may detest someone so much that whenever you think of them tears of fury start to flow. Do you see what I mean? How could that be real and lasting?

See mental states as merely mental states. All of them are impermanent. We have to cut things off because they will delude us if we don't. We perceive something as good, and we remind ourselves that the good is changeful. Something else is experienced as bad, and that is changeful too. Don't let your mind grasp on to the good; don't let it grasp on to the bad. If you have the measure of mental states in this way, then they lose their significance. Just keep working away at it. The states that arise, good or bad, have no intrinsic value, and they will gradually fade away. If you follow them and keep an eye on them, you're bound to see this truth of changefulness. Your initial practice has to be like this. Be mindful.

Subsequently, you will see the breath, mindfulness and the mind simultaneously at one point. The word 'see' here doesn't refer to ordinary vision. It's a seeing with awareness, by the internal, not the external, eye. The awareness of the breath is here, mindfulness is here, the sense of knowing – the mind – is here.

They converge in one harmonious whole. When we see that harmony, the mind will detach from sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*), ill-will (*vyāpāda*), sloth and torpor (*thīnamiddha*), worry and agitation (*uddhaccakukkucca*), and indecision (*vicikicchā*). These five hindrances will be gone completely. All that you will see is the breath. There will be just mindfulness and the mind in one point. With the absence of the five hindrances, you can take it that the mind has entered samādhi.

You must know when the breath is coarse and when it is fine, and you have to know right there. After that, you must focus on the breath to make it more and more subtle and fine until its coarseness has disappeared. The refinement of the breath is such that as you sit and contemplate the breath, it becomes so subtle that there's almost no breath, or so it seems. Don't be alarmed. The breath is still there, it's just that it's extremely subtle. So, what do you do then? You must use your mindfulness to make the absence of breath your meditation object. At this point, some people may become alarmed, afraid that their breathing will stop and that it's dangerous. You must reassure yourself that it's quite safe and that there's no danger. All that is necessary is that you maintain mindfulness, the awareness, the knowing.

The mind is now in a very subtle state. At this level, it doesn't have to be controlled, you don't have to do anything. All that is needed is to maintain mindfulness and alertness. You should be aware that at that moment the mind is acting automatically, it's not necessary to adjust its quality. Now simply maintain a steady mindfulness and alertness. The mind has fully entered the state of lucid calm. Sometimes the mind will enter and leave this state at short intervals. Sometimes when it has withdrawn, it will become lucidly calm again for a short time, and then it will emerge once more and become aware of sense objects. The mind, having withdrawn from samādhi, comprehends the nature of various things that arise in awareness. There will be a rapture in the Dhamma, wisdom will arise. Many kinds of knowledge will arise at this point.

The mind, at this moment, will have entered the stage of *vipassanā*<sup>\*</sup>. You must firmly establish mindfulness, concentration and alertness. When wisdom arises, the mind is in *vipassanā*, which is a continuation of *samatha*<sup>\*\*</sup>. This is called the process of the mind. You must attain mastery (*vasī*) in entering and leaving states of tranquillity. When you have done so, then you will know the nature of the states of mind and the nature of the mind that withdraws. You must be astute in entering and leaving *samādhi*, establishing a strong degree of mindfulness and alertness at these points. Here the mind has come to an end of turmoil. Whether it's moving forwards or back, all the states of mind lie within the lucid calm.

On reaching the appropriate time for the meditation to end, review what you did before you entered *samādhi*. How did you establish your mind so as to be so peaceful? Then, the next time you sit, you must consider the first thing to do. Recall how you focused your mind when you withdrew from *samādhi*. You must know this. Although you have ended your sitting meditation, you should not look on it as an end to *samādhi*. You should be determined to continue being aware and focused and mindful. Whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down, you must be constantly mindful.

#### AN ASIDE

The meditation instruction in the previous section is long and detailed. It includes a number of technical terms and references to some advanced levels of practice and subtle states of mind. However, it should be borne in mind that this instruction was not intended by Luang Por to be a definitive account of the meditation process. The text is a transcription of one particular instruction given on one particular day to one particular group of monastics. Luang Por did not write a meditation manual, and he rarely spoke about more advanced levels of practice in public. For this reason,

<sup>\*</sup>Clear insight into the three characteristics of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self.

<sup>\*\*</sup>States of mindful tranquillity resulting from abandonment of the five hindrances.

some of his views on meditation practice will always remain obscure. And this is also true about his advice on more basic matters.

In the paragraph above dealing with the choice of a meditation technique, the statement is made that meditators should stick with a practice ‘for a reasonable period of time’ before deciding to change it. But how long is a ‘reasonable’ time? Certainly a reasonable question – but not, unfortunately, one that can be answered with words from Luang Por’s mouth. (A period of time measured in weeks or months – rather than hours or minutes – would be the answer that he would probably, but did not actually, give.)

Accurately conveying Luang Por’s meditation teachings is thus somewhat hampered by the unevenness of the body of recorded evidence; some topics are well-covered, others not so well at all. Complications are also caused by the fact that the material that is available is transcribed from instructions given ad hoc and which are reflective of time, place and audience. Luang Por’s response to questions about the importance of the cultivation of *jhāna* (absorption), for example, varied according to the character and accumulated foundational virtues of the questioner. In other words, if he saw meditators had a well-developed capacity for *jhāna*, he would encourage it (and it would appear that he considered this the superior path). But if he saw meditators had only a weak capacity, or were getting caught up in the trap of craving for *jhāna*, he might de-emphasize it. If he saw that meditators possessed strong powers of analysis, he might encourage them to make use of those powers when the mind had gone beyond the hindrances, without waiting for the stabilization of mind provided by *jhāna*. In this, his teaching paralleled that of his great contemporary, Luang Ta Maha Bua, who coined the phrase: ‘paññā cultivating samādhi’.

Another problem is encountered in translating the transcribed records of Luang Por’s meditation teachings, and it springs from the nature of the Thai language. Thai lends itself much more to flexible ambiguity than to scientific precision. For example, it insists much less on the use of third person pronouns than is the case in English. Questions of who or what are acting upon whom or what can be hard to determine with any great degree of certainty. In matters dealing with the physical world, context

often comes to the translator's rescue; in matters dealing with the more profound functions of the mind, the translator is rarely so fortunate.

One last layer of difficulty is furnished by the occasionally idiosyncratic manner in which Luang Por and his contemporaries in the Isan Forest Tradition use Pali technical terms. For readers coming from a more academic Theravada background, this can be a source of frustration. For a translator, it may involve being faced with passages in which the meaning ascribed to a term by the teacher does not correspond exactly to the definition in a Pali-English dictionary. One way to look at this discrepancy is by means of an analogy. If the Suttas might be compared with a photograph of the nature of things, then the teachings of the great masters would be like paintings. In their attempt to bring out their sense of what is before them, painters sometimes slightly manipulate forms or use colours not recognised by the camera. Their intention is to transmit the truth of their experience to the best of their abilities. Similarly, the great forest masters of Isan have, on occasion, put fidelity to the Dhamma that they have realized above a strict fidelity to the texts.

To summarize, the meditation teachings of Luang Por represented in this chapter contain many gems and useful reflections. But, for the reasons given above, they do not coalesce into a complete system. If Luang Por were alive today and speaking to a student of his teachings, he would perhaps give the following advice: 'Attention to detail is good. Precision and clarity are good. But always be willing to tolerate a certain element of incompleteness and ambiguity.'

#### NOT JUST SITTING

Many Wat Pah Pong monastics practised walking meditation\* as much as or more than sitting meditation. The Buddha listed its benefits as producing a strong constitution, good digestion, physical endurance, and a readiness to strive. Most importantly, he said that the samādhi arising during walking meditation is more easily sustained outside formal practice sessions than that developed while sitting (AN 5.29).

\*Pali: *cāñkama*; Thai: *jongkrom*.

Walking meditation provides both an alternative and a complement to sitting meditation. It is a good substitute for sitting meditation when physical ailments make sitting impractical or when hindrances that arise strongly during sitting are more manageable or absent while walking. Walking tends to be the best choice following a meal, for example, when mental dullness is likely to make sitting meditation difficult.

Walking complements sitting by requiring cultivation of mindfulness in movement rather than stillness. Although the meditator walks with eyes downcast, the consciousness of forms and sounds, together with the rhythm of walking, prevents the meditator from becoming detached from the world of the senses in the same way that is possible during sitting meditation. As a result, it is often more difficult to pacify the mind while walking. But once the mind has become calm, the experience of varying sense data, combined with the regular physical movements of the posture, is conducive to the development of wisdom. The thoughts that arise from the calmness become *dhammavicaya*, the investigation of Dhamma.

In Thai forest monasteries like Wat Pah Pong, every kuti has its own walking path, usually from twenty to thirty paces long. Luang Por recommended walking at a more or less normal pace in order to develop a habit of awareness easily integrated into daily life. Hands were to be clasped in front of the abdomen, never behind the back (a style more suited to that of a general inspecting the troops than a monk, Luang Por said), and most definitely not hanging loosely by one's sides. In addition to being perceived to be unsightly, walking without clasping the hands together was considered too relaxed to promote inner restraint; walking in such a way was too similar to leisurely strolling to be appropriate for meditation.

Luang Por instructed that before beginning the session, meditators should stand and pay homage to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha in the manner they saw fit and clarify their intention for the following session. Then they should begin to walk back and forth along the path, maintaining a constant mindfulness and alertness as they walked. One method by which this was to be achieved, Luang Por would advise, was through use of the mantra 'Buddho', mentally reciting 'Bud' as the right foot touches the ground, and 'dho' as the left foot touches. This was the basic means of stilling the mind.

Maintain a continuous awareness on the object. If your mind becomes agitated or you get weary, then stop and still the mind, ease it by focusing on the breath. When the mind has become sufficiently calm, then resume the walking meditation. Keep a constant alertness. Establish awareness at the beginning of the path. Be aware of it all: the beginning of the path, the middle of the path, the end of the path. Keep the awareness unbroken while you are walking. Sometimes a feeling of panic or fear may arise. Go against it. It's changeful. Courage arises and that doesn't last either. It's all changeful. There's nothing to grasp on to. This gives rise to wisdom. Bringing forth wisdom doesn't refer to a knowledge based on memory; it means knowing the mind that thinks and perceives. All thoughts and perceptions arise in our minds.

Good or bad, right or wrong, just acknowledge their presence, don't give them any undue significance. Suffering is just suffering. Happiness is just happiness. It's all a fraud. Hold your ground. Don't go chasing after them. Don't chase after happiness and don't chase after suffering. Know them. Know them and then put them down. Wisdom will arise. Keep going against the stream of the mind.

When you feel sufficiently tired, then stop and come off of the walking path but be careful to maintain the continuity of mindfulness. Standing, walking, sitting or lying down, maintain a constant awareness. Whether you're walking to the village on alms-round, walking through the village receiving food, eating the food or whatever, be mindful at all times in every posture.

Luang Por recommended that meditators not follow their first thought to end a walking meditation session. He said that after deciding to leave their walking path, they should continue walking for at least a few more minutes. Sometimes, the feeling that it was time to change posture would pass away by itself, and the meditation could be extended. If not, and it was indeed a good time to stop, then a wise habit of not reacting immediately to the impulses of a mind that might well be tainted by defilement had been strengthened.

Luang Por taught that effort had to be sustained from the first moment of consciousness in the early morning until the last moment before sleep – in every posture:

When you lie down, then lie on your right side with the left foot resting on the right. Concentrate on ‘Bud-dho Bud-dho’ until you fall asleep. This is what is called lying down with mindfulness.

On one occasion, he maintained that an adept practitioner could remember whether he fell asleep on the inhalation or exhalation.

Whether meditating while walking, sitting, standing or lying down, the daily practice was to re-establish balance as soon as it was lost. Meditators were to be patient and persevering. Allowing the mind to become discouraged or irritated when it refused to stay on its object would only compound the problem. Taming the mind was like taming a wild animal. If you didn’t give up, then sooner or later the animal was sure to. In another of his favourite animal similes, he compared the practice to herding a water buffalo:

Your mind is like a water buffalo. Mental states are like rice plants. The knowing is like the owner. What do you do when you graze a buffalo? You let it go its way. But you keep an eye on it. If it goes close to the rice plants, then you yell at it. When the buffalo hears you, it moves away. But you can’t afford to let your attention wander. If it’s stubborn and won’t obey you, then you have to get a stick and give it a thrashing.

## II. THORNS AND PRICKLES

### HINDRANCES

The immediate obstacles to the development of samādhi and wisdom are a group of defilements that the Buddha called the *nīvaraṇa* or hindrances. He described them as ‘overgrowths of the mind that stultify insight’. They are five in number:

1. Kāmacchanda – sensual thoughts.

2. Vyāpāda – ill-will.
3. Thīnamiddha – sloth and torpor.
4. Uddhaccakukkucca – agitation, guilt, remorse.
5. Vicikicchā – Doubt and indecision.

The Buddha made clear the vital importance of dealing with the hindrances as follows:

*Without having overcome these five, it is impossible for a monk whose insight thus lacks strength and power, to know his own true weal, the weal of others, and the weal of both; or that he will be capable of realizing that superior human state of distinctive achievement, a truly noble distinction in knowledge and vision.*

AN 5.51

Elsewhere the Buddha compared the hindrances to the baser metals impairing the purity of gold:

*Once the gold has been freed of impurities, then it becomes pliant and wieldy and can be wrought into whatever ornaments one wishes. Similarly, the mind freed of the five hindrances will be pliant and wieldy, will have radiant lucidity and firmness, and will concentrate well upon the eradication of the taints. To whatever state realizable by the higher mental faculties one may direct the mind, one will, in each case, acquire the capacity of realization, if the other conditions are fulfilled.*

AN 5.23

The basic method for dealing with hindrances is to cultivate a mindful, balanced effort combined with positive regard for the meditation object to the extent that as yet unarisen hindrances do not arise in the first place. When that is not possible, and having become aware that they are caught in a hindrance, meditators are taught to abandon it without regret and patiently return to the meditation object. Rather than immediately re-establishing attention on the breath, Luang Por taught that, at that moment of recognizing the hindrance for what it was and letting it go,

meditators should also acknowledge the distraction as ‘mai nae’: changeful, impermanent, unstable. By doing so, they introduced an element of wisdom into meditation that would gradually flourish as their meditation skills grew.

When something arises in your mind – no matter if it’s something you like or something you dislike, something you think is right or something you think is wrong – cut it right off by reminding yourself, ‘It’s changeful.’ It doesn’t matter what it is, just chop right through it, ‘changeful, changeful’. Use this single axe to chop through mental states. Everything is subject to change. Where can you find anything real and solid? If you see this instability, then the value of everything decreases. Mental states are all worthless. Why would you want things of no value?

For those struggling with the hindrances and feeling discouraged at their lack of success, he gave the following encouragement:

Even if your mind finds no peace, merely sitting cross-legged and putting forth effort is already a fine thing. This is the truth. You could compare it to being hungry and having nothing to eat except plain rice. You’ve got nothing to eat with the rice, and you feel upset. What I’m saying is, it’s good that you’ve got rice to eat. Plain rice is better than nothing at all, isn’t it? If plain rice is all you’ve got, then eat it up. Practice is the same: even if you experience only a very small amount of calm, it’s still a good thing.

If the simple expedient of patiently returning to the object again and again was not working, then specific antidotes needed to be employed. There was much to be learned in the quest to transcend the hindrances. Luang Por advised looking on them as teachers or tests of wisdom rather than enemies

#### SENSUAL DESIRE

The first hindrance occurs through indulgence in thoughts bound up with the sensual world. The meditator who is still unable to find satisfaction in meditation tends to seek pleasure, warmth and distraction by turning

to the world of the senses. This hindrance's most powerful expression lies in sexual desires and fantasies, but it also includes taking pleasure in memories or imagination relating to any other aspect of the sensual world that the meditator finds attractive – food, music, movies, sport, politics – any topic at all that is felt to be enjoyable by the one who dwells upon it.

In dealing with this hindrance, Luang Por emphasized the protection of sense-restraint. Eating little, sleeping little, talking little were made key principles for the Sangha at Wat Pah Pong. The mind was to be taught to avoid becoming engrossed in the general appearance or particular features of any sense object. It was not possible to simply turn off a habit of indulgence in sensual pleasures for the duration of a meditation session. There also had to be a constant effort to govern such desires in daily life.

As the key condition for this hindrance is dwelling unwisely on the attractive aspects of sensual experience, the specific antidote lies in replacing it with wise reflection on the unattractive aspects. Sexual desire being the most potent and disruptive expression of the hindrance, it is the one to which most specific remedies are applied.

Visualize the body as a corpse in the process of decay or think of the parts of the body such as lungs, spleen, fat, faeces, and so forth. Remember these and visualize this loathsome aspect of the body when lust arises. This will free you from lust.

If you look at the human body and you like what you see, then ask yourself why. Investigate it. Look at head hair, body hair, nails, teeth and skin. The Buddha taught us to hammer in the reflection on these things. Distinguish them one by one, separate them from the body, visualize setting fire to them or peeling off the skin. Do that until you become fluent.

Contemplation of the body has already been referred to as a meditation object in its own right, and as a preliminary exercise preceding mindfulness of breathing. Here it is employed as a means of hauling the mind back onto the middle path when it has strayed into the realm of the senses. Once the hindrance has been abandoned, meditators may then resume their focus on their original meditation object.

Ill-will is conditioned by ungratified desire. Its occurrence in meditation is often based on an obsession with things or people that are not doing, saying or being the way we would prefer. The mind picks up a rankling perception or memory and broods on it. In Jack Kornfield's *Notes from a Session of Questions and Answers*, Luang Por is asked for advice in dealing with this hindrance:

"How about anger? What should I do when I feel anger arising?"

You must use loving-kindness. When angry states of mind arise in meditation, balance them by developing feelings of loving-kindness. If someone does something bad or gets angry, don't get angry yourself. If you do, you are being more ignorant than they are. Be wise. Keep compassion in mind, for that person is suffering. Fill your mind with loving-kindness as if he were a dear brother. Concentrate on the feeling of loving-kindness as a meditation subject. Spread it to all beings in the world. Only through loving-kindness is hatred overcome.

Sometimes you may see other monks behaving badly. You may get annoyed. This is suffering unnecessarily. It is not yet our Dhamma. You may think like this, 'He is not as strict as I am. They are not serious meditators like us. Those monks are not good monks.' This is a great defilement on your part. Do not make comparisons. Do not discriminate. Let go of your opinions and watch your mind. This is our Dhamma. You can't possibly make everyone act as you wish or to be like you. This wish will only make you suffer. It is a common mistake for meditators to make, but watching other people won't develop wisdom. Simply examine yourself, your feelings. This is how you will understand.

Although it makes sense for meditators to seek the most supportive environment for practising meditation, there is almost always something or other that the mind, if it wishes, can latch on to with aversion. When meditators complained about external conditions disturbing them, Luang Por would reply that the problem did not lie in the condition. Conditions were just doing what conditions have always done and always will do:

arise and pass away. The problem arose, he said, because the meditator was disturbing the condition. In other words, it was the meditator's aversion to the condition, rather than the condition itself, that was the true hindrance to meditation.

Often the hindrance of ill-will occurs as a dissatisfaction or frustration with the meditator's practice. Meditators can become aggravated by their inability to progress as fast as they hoped, angry at the particular problems that arise, resentful of physical pain that makes it hard to focus. They dwell on the things that they don't like again and again until a deep furrow is dug, into which their mind throws itself repeatedly. Meditation itself can become an object of aversion. A frightening experience or strong painful feelings while sitting may make the mind resist continuing the practice. At this stage, meditators look to fill their time with every possible activity except meditation. When affected by this hindrance, Luang Por encouraged his disciples to keep returning to the basic principle enshrined in the Four Noble Truths: suffering arises through craving. In this case, the root of the problem lies in the desire not to have, not to be, not to have to experience: the 'I don't need this' mind.

Your mind is chaotic because of craving. You don't want to think, you don't want to have anything going on in your mind. This 'not wanting' is the craving called '*vibhavatañhā*'. The more you desire not to think, the more you encourage thoughts. You don't want the mind to think, so why do the thoughts come? You don't want it to be that way, so why is it? Exactly! It's because you don't understand your mind that you want it to be a certain way.

While Luang Por emphasized this understanding of craving as an antidote to this hindrance, the Suttas recommend meditation on loving-kindness. By its systematic development, thoughts of kindness and benevolence are able to replace thoughts of anger and resentment. Interestingly, this meditation was not one that Luang Por greatly encouraged for monastics. He considered it to be a risky practice for a celibate monk or nun as the pure emotion of loving-kindness could easily morph into more sensual feelings. Also, monastics who practised loving-kindness meditation diligently often became very attractive to the opposite sex, which could also jeopardise their monastic vocation.

## SLOTH AND TORPOR

The third of the five hindrances, sloth and torpor, occurs most readily in a mind habituated to a high level of stimulation. In such cases, focusing on a single, unexciting object like the breath tends to induce feelings of boredom followed by dullness. It can lead to meditators losing their awareness altogether, sitting with head bobbing up and down, or slumped on their chest. This hindrance also afflicts meditators who indulge in the relaxed feelings that occur with the elimination of coarse mental agitation. In its more subtle forms, the hindrance can manifest as a state of mind that is calm but stiff and unwieldy. On one occasion, the Buddha compared the mind overcome with sloth and torpor to a prisoner in a dark and stuffy dungeon and, at another time, likened it to fresh water choked by water plants.

For the monastics at Wat Pah Pong, the simple and repetitive way of life, free of most of the grosser kinds of sensual stimulation, reduced the likelihood that their minds would react against the discipline required in formal meditation. Luang Por's regular reminders to sustain mindfulness and sense-restraint in all postures were thus aimed at reducing the gap between the meditator's awareness in periods of formal meditation and daily life. Monks were encouraged to observe factors that increased or decreased their tendency towards laziness and mental dullness. Food intake was one obvious variable.

If you find yourself sleepy every day, try to eat less. Examine yourself. As soon as five more spoonfuls will make you full, stop. Then take water until just properly full. Go and sit. Watch your sleepiness and hunger. You must learn to balance your eating. As your practice goes on, you will feel naturally more energetic and eat less. But you must adjust yourself.

Luang Por gave many exhortations aimed at inspiring in his disciples the wholesome desire to strive for freedom from defilement and to realize inner liberation. It was bearing this wholesome desire (*Dhamma chanda*) in mind that played the largest role in guarding against the hindrance of sloth and torpor. Without cultivating this strong aspiration to penetrate the Four Noble Truths, meditators going through periods of emotional

turmoil or strong defilement could find their minds retreating into dullness during meditation as a means of anaesthetizing their mental pain.

The weekly all-night sittings were opportunities for monks at Wat Pah Pong to come face-to-face with drowsiness and to be given no choice but to seek for skilful means to overcome it. Emerging from a period of drowsiness after a steady refusal to give in to it could be an empowering and even rapturous experience. The patience accumulated by a regular practice of working with drowsiness was not an immediately obvious benefit, but many monks would acknowledge that over a period of months and years, it became increasingly evident.

Nevertheless, whenever monks were pushing themselves physically – during monastery work projects, for example – and particularly in periods of hot and humid weather, sloth and torpor could still be a major obstacle. Luang Por gave a number of practical tips:

There are many ways to overcome sleepiness. If you are sitting in the dark, move to a lighted place. Open your eyes. Get up and wash your face or take a shower. If you are sleepy, change postures. Walk a lot. Walk backwards – the fear of running into things will keep you awake. If this fails, stand still, clear the mind and imagine it is full daylight. Or sit on the edge of a high cliff or deep well. You won't dare sleep! If nothing works, then just go to sleep. Lay down carefully and try to be aware until the moment you fall asleep. Then as you awaken, get right up. Don't look at the clock or roll over. Start practising mindfulness from the moment you wake up.

Continuity of practice was essential. If meditators allowed sloth and torpor in its guise as laziness or reluctance to hold them back, they were lost. They had to develop a consistent effort, impervious to passing moods.

When you feel diligent, practice. When you feel lazy, practice.

## AGITATION AND WORRY

The fourth hindrance consists of two kinds of mental noise. Firstly, agitation – a busy restlessness of mind; and secondly, worry or guilty thoughts about the past. Only when the mind is asked to sustain attention on an object is the full extent of its habitual unrest revealed. The mad pinballing of the mind that ensues is the first great frustration experienced by the new meditator. As with other hindrances, the default remedy is to patiently bring the mind back to the object again and again until the mind is tamed. But when the mind is agitated, trying to restrain it can be a tiring and thankless task. Luang Por would caution meditators to be wary of falling into the trap of ‘vibhavatañhā’, the craving to get rid of something. Rather than providing the impetus to free the mind from this hindrance, this kind of craving only made matters worse. A confused meditator asked him:

“So when it darts about, I should just keep watching it?”

When it darts about, it’s right there. You don’t follow it, but you’re aware of it. Where could it go? It’s in the cage. It can’t go anywhere. Your problem is that you don’t want anything going on in your mind. Luang Pu Mun called that vacant state, ‘treestump samādhi’. If your mind is darting around, know that it’s doing that. If it’s motionless, then know that. What more do you need? Just have the measure of both movement and stillness. If today the mind is peaceful, then see it as a foundation for wisdom. But people like the peace, it makes them happy. They say, ‘Today I had a wonderful sitting, so peaceful.’ There! If you think like that, then the next day it will be hopeless, your mind will be a jumble. And then it’s, ‘Oh! Today my sitting was terrible.’

Ultimately, good and bad have the same value. Good things are impermanent; bad things are impermanent. Why give them so much significance? If the mind is agitated, then look at that. If it’s peaceful, then look at that. In this way, you allow wisdom to arise. Agitation is a natural expression of the mind. Just don’t get caught up with it.

A monkey doesn't keep still, does it? Suppose you see a monkey and start to feel uncomfortable because it won't keep still. You begin to wonder when it will ever stop moving around. You want to make it still so that you can feel at ease. But that's the way monkeys are. A Bangkok monkey, an Ubon monkey – monkeys are the same everywhere. It's a monkey's nature to move about, and realizing that is the end of the problem. If you're going to keep suffering all the time because the monkey doesn't keep still, you're on your way to an early grave. You'll be even more of a monkey than a monkey is.

#### DOUBT AND INDECISION

The last of the hindrances, sceptical doubt, is the most insidious and crippling member of the group. It is characterized by vacillation, by the hesitation to follow through on a commitment. The hindrance occurs when meditators possess sufficient information about the teachings or the technique to take them through the initial stages of practice, but they become paralyzed by a need to be sure of the effectiveness of the method, or the teacher, or the teachings, or their own capacity to progress, before making the effort and renunciation necessary to verify it.

Not all doubt is a hindrance to meditation practice. On the contrary, some doubts are taken to be signs of intelligence. Speaking to the Kālāmas, the Buddha said, 'It is good. You are doubting about things worthy of doubt.' The doubts of those who recognize that they lack the necessary information or the clear criteria to make a good choice are not considered to be defilements of the mind. The hindrance is born from a craving for guarantees that cannot be provided. The Buddha's simile to illustrate this hindrance is of a traveller lost in a desolate place, whose fear of the possible dangers on the path to safety outweigh his desire to reach that safety.

In the early days of Wat Pah Pong, the majority of the monastics and lay supporters received only the rudiments of a formal education and had strong confidence in Luang Por. They were not given to much pondering over the teachings. Their main doubts would centre on whether or not they wanted to remain as monks. In later years, with more people

from the city coming to the monastery, and growing numbers of Western disciples, over-thinking became more of an issue in the monastery. Doubts about the teacher, the teaching, the student's ability to practise the teacher's teaching, multiplied. Luang Por's response to the chronic doubters was always to point out:

Doubting never stops because of someone else's words. Doubts come to an end through your own actions.

Placing unquestioning trust in the words of an authority figure can suppress doubts on one level, but it is a strategy that can never achieve a lasting security from them. Luang Por taught that the only way to go beyond doubts was through insight into their nature as impermanent, conditioned mental states. On one occasion, he explained why he didn't conduct daily interviews with the monks as is the practice in many meditation centres:

If I answer your every little question, you will never understand the process of doubt in your own mind. It is essential that you learn to examine yourself, to interview yourself. Listen carefully to the Dhamma talk every few days, then use the teaching to compare with your own practice. Is it the same? Is it different? Why do you have doubts? Who is it that doubts? Only through self-examination will you understand.



If you doubt everything, then you'll become totally miserable. You'll be off your food and unable to sleep, spending your whole time chasing after this view and that. What you must bear in mind is that your mind is a liar ... Mental states are just that way; they don't last. Don't run around with them. Just know them with equanimity. As one doubt passes away and a new one arises in its place, be aware of that for what it is as well. Then you'll be at ease. If you rush about after your doubts, then not only will you be unhappy, but the doubts will increase.

On reaching a certain point in their practice, some meditators would begin to wonder about the identity of the states they were experiencing while they were meditating. Luang Por would say they weren't on a

highway; there were no signposts in the mind. On another occasion, he said it did not really matter if you were ignorant of the name of a fruit as long as you were aware of its sweetness and fragrance:

Meditation is the same. It's not necessary to know what things are called. If you know the name of the fruit, that doesn't make it any sweeter. So be aware of the relevant causal conditions of that state. But if you don't know the name, it doesn't matter. You know the flavour ... If someone tells you the name, then take note of it; but if they don't, there's no need to get upset.

Luang Por once reassured a Western disciple:

Doubting is natural. Everyone starts out with doubts. You can learn a great deal from them. What is important is that you don't identify with your doubts: that is, don't get caught up in them. This will spin your mind in endless circles. Instead, watch the whole process of doubting, of wondering. See who it is that doubts. See how doubts come and go. Then you will no longer be victimized by your doubts. You will step outside of them, and your mind will be quiet. You can see how all things come and go. Just let go of what you are attached to. Let go of your doubts and simply watch. This is how to end doubting.

### III. WAYS AND MEANS

#### SKILFUL MEANS

The hindrances do not appear in the mind as the result of meditation; rather, it is that meditation reveals hindrances that are already latent within the mind but which are difficult to isolate and deal with effectively in daily life. Meditation might be compared to putting the mind under a microscope in order to see the harmful viruses, invisible to the naked eye, that are threatening its health. Luang Por reminded his disciples that encountering the hindrances in meditation should not be a source of discouragement. In dealing with hindrances, meditators were getting to know how the mind worked and how to deal with it most effectively.

He said that meditators should be constantly observing and reviewing what worked in their meditation and what did not. They should treat their mind as parents did a child: expressing a measured appreciation and encouragement when it did well; being consistently firm and fair when it needed admonishment. The untrained mind was like a wilful child that followed its moods and often got into mischief. The meditator was not to smother the mind with overly close attention but to keep a constant eye on it wherever it might go, and prevent it from falling into danger. Learning from mistakes and being creative in finding ways to deal with problems that arose in meditation were good things. At the same time, care should be taken not to develop so many skilful means that the essential simplicity of the practice was forgotten and more harm done than good.

#### PHYSICAL PAIN

Sometimes you may break out in a sweat. Big beads, as large as corn kernels, rolling down your chest. But when you've passed through painful feeling once, then you will know all about it. Keep working at it. Don't push yourself too much, but keep steadily practising.

Physical discomfort arising during sitting meditation can range from a dull ache to cramps to agonizing pain. As the discomfort is dependent upon the meditator's choice of posture, he or she has the power to bring it to an end by moving. The question arises as to whether the meditator in pain should change posture, and if so, at which point. Luang Por's usual advice was that meditators should not move out of a reactivity bred from fear or anxiety. At first, they should attempt to turn attention from the pain by repeatedly returning to the meditation object. If that became impossible, meditators should take the physical sensation of pain itself as their meditation object. In the case that mindfulness was still not strong enough to deal with the pain, then the meditator should change posture. Luang Por cautioned his disciples given to pushing the limits of their endurance to ensure that their enthusiasm was always governed by wisdom. Too much wilful endurance of physical pain in meditation by

a beginner could gradually lead to a sense of dreariness, an aversion to practice, or in extreme cases, a visit to the doctors.

On some occasions, Luang Por urged disciples to persevere right through the dark tunnel of painful feeling and emerge on the other side. Meditators who can endure pain to the point at which it reaches a crescendo and then dissolves, experience a great rapture and enter a state of deep calm. Having ‘gone beyond’ painful feeling in this way, meditators’ fear of pain and thus, of death, is usually much diminished. Even more importantly, the natural separation of the physical feeling of pain and the awareness of it provides a profound understanding of the impersonality of feeling. The realization of how much of what was assumed to be physical pain is, in fact, the instinctive emotional reaction to the pain, and that it can be released through mindfulness, can be the grounds for a significant breakthrough in practice.

#### THE RIGHT APPROACH

In its most elevated form, *paññā* manifests as the penetrative insight into things ‘as they are’ which eliminates the defilements generating suffering and constitutes the culmination of the Buddha’s path to liberation. But the same training which achieves its consummation through wisdom also begins with wisdom. At this initial stage, it is referred to as Mundane Right View. Its most important feature is a conviction in the law of kamma and the human capacity for liberation through practice of the Eightfold Path.

Luang Por devoted a great deal of time to correcting the misguided views and false assumptions that could lead meditators astray. Time and again, he sought to clarify the principles of Right View, which he called, ‘the cool place where all heat and agitation cease’.

One persistent wrong view involved a belief that the causal process leading to liberation could be bypassed by means of a certain technique or skilful means. Luang Por’s insistence on *khanti*, or patience, as the fundamental virtue in practice of the Buddha’s path meant he gave short shrift to people impatient for results. When a lay meditator asked him for a short cut, he replied:

If that's what you want, you might as well just forget about the whole thing.

On another occasion, he said:

If the causes are insufficient, the results will fail to appear.  
It's natural. For liberation to take place you must be patient.  
Patience is the leading principle in practice.

Speaking to a group of lay meditators, he said:

Meditating in order to realize lucid calm is not the same as pressing a switch and expecting everything to be immediately flooded with light. Putting forth effort in meditation is like writing out a sentence: you can't omit a single one of its words or phrases. All dhammas arise from causes; results will only cease when their causes do.

You must keep steadily doing it, steadily practising. You're not going to attain or see anything in one or two days ... You must try to put forth a constant effort. You can't comprehend this through someone else's words. You have to discover it for yourself. It's not how much you meditate – you can do just a little – but do it every day. And practise walking meditation every day as well. Irrespective of whether you do a lot or a little, do it every day. Be sparing with your speech and watch your mind the whole time. Keep refuting the perception of permanence in whatever arises in your mind, whether pleasurable or painful. Nothing lasts; it's all deceptive.

How could it fail to be difficult to train the mind, he would say, when people had neglected to do so all their life up to that time, and probably for many lifetimes previously. The army of Dhamma was still vastly outnumbered by the army of defilements. It would take time to make the contest more equal.

Rather than continually looking forward to a desired goal, like a child in a car asking again and again how much longer before they arrived, meditators were encouraged to proceed steadily along their chosen path of practice with attention to the quality of the effort that they were

making moment by moment. Meditators should trust that when causes were ripe, results would inevitably appear.

The Buddha taught us to move forward, not too slowly and not too fast, but to make the mind ‘just-right’. There’s no need to get worked up about it all. If you are, then you should reflect that practice is like planting a tree. You dig a hole and place the tree in it. After that, it’s your job to fill in the earth, to put fertilizer on it, to water the tree and to protect it from pests. That’s your duty; it’s what orchard owners have to do. But whether the tree grows fast or slow is its own business; it’s nothing to do with you. If you don’t know the limits of your own responsibilities, you’ll end up trying to do the work of the tree as well, and you’ll suffer. All you have to do is see to the fertilizer, the watering and keeping the insects away. The speed of growth of the tree is the tree’s business. If you know what is your responsibility and what is not, then your meditation will be smooth and relaxed, not stressed and fretful.

When your sitting is calm, then watch the calmness. When it’s not calm, then watch that ... If there’s calm, there’s calm; if there’s not, there’s not. You mustn’t let yourself suffer if your mind’s not calm. It’s a mistake to rejoice when your mind is calm, or to mope when it’s not. Would you let yourself suffer about a tree? About the sunshine or the rain? Things are what they are and if you understand that, your meditation will go well. So keep travelling along the path, keep practising, keep attending to your duties and meditating at the appropriate times. As for what you get from it, what you attain, what calmness you achieve, that will depend on the potency of the virtue you have accumulated. Just as the orchard owner who knows the extent of his responsibilities towards the tree keeps in good humour, so, when the practitioner understands his duties in his practice, then ‘just-rightness’ establishes itself naturally.

While Luang Por saw how important it was for his disciples to acquire a firm foundation of knowledge of the Buddha’s teachings, he also warned against the detrimental effect of too much or unwise study:

There are learned teachers who write about first absorption (*jhāna*), second absorption, third absorption, fourth absorption and so on, but if the mind gets to the level of lucid calm, it's not aware of all of that. All it knows is that what it's experiencing is not the same as in the books. If a student of the texts grasps on tightly to his knowledge when he enters states of lucid calm and likes to keep noting, 'What's this? Is it the first absorption yet?', his mind will simply make a complete retreat from the calm, and he'll get nothing from it. Why? Because he wants something. The moment there's craving to realize something, the mind pulls back from the lucid calm.

That's why you've got to throw away all your thoughts and doubts, and take only your body, speech and mind into the practice. Look inwardly at states of mind, but don't drag your scriptures in there with you – it's not the place for them. If you insist on it, then everything will go down the drain, because nothing in the books is the same as it is in experience. It's precisely because of this attachment to book knowledge that people who study a lot, who know a lot, tend to be unsuccessful in meditation.

#### NO IDEAS OF GAIN

Meditators were constantly reminded that they had embarked on a practice of renunciation and letting go. Seeking visions or psychic powers through meditation was to miss the point altogether. If a craving to gain or attain something took root in meditators' minds, then they had entered upon a path without ultimate resolution. The desire to realize some special experience might lead on to new elevated realms of existence, but not to liberation. Seeking rebirth in refined states of consciousness was like a bird flying deliberately into a gilded cage. At the beginning of practice, the best motto was to be cool, steady and patient. Unwise gaining ideas at this stage could lead to meditators giving up altogether.

Sometimes in meditation practice, people make determinations that are too extreme. They light incense, bow and make a vow, 'As long as this incense has not burned down, then I will not move from my sitting posture under any circumstances. Whether I

fall unconscious or die, whatever happens, I'll die right here.' As soon as they've made the solemn declaration, they start to meditate and then, within moments, the *māras*<sup>\*</sup> attack them from all sides. They open their eyes to glance at the incense sticks, 'Oh no! There's still loads left.' They grit their teeth and start again.

Their minds are hot and bothered and in a turmoil. They're at their wits' end. They've had enough, and they look at the incense sticks again: surely, they must be at an end. 'Oh no. Not even half way!' This happens three or four times, and then they give up. They sit and blame themselves for being hopeless, 'Oh, why am I such an idiot, it's so humiliating', and so on. They sit there suffering about being insincere and bad – all kinds of things – until their minds are in an utter mess, and then the hindrances arise. If this kind of effort doesn't lead to ill-will towards others, it leads to ill-will towards yourself. Why? Because of craving. In fact, you don't have to take resolutions that far. You don't have to make the resolution to tie yourself up like that. Just make the resolution to let go.

Progress in meditation is, for the most part, incremental – the gradually increasing dampness of a walker's coat in fog, as one Japanese master has put it, rather than its obvious drenching by rain. But there can also be periods of great intensity. At such times, desire for clear validation of their efforts leads many meditators to give an exaggerated importance to unusual meditative experiences that occur. The intense feelings of rapture that often accompany such experiences seem to confirm their significance. Luang Por's insistence that all experiences are ultimately of the same value, being equally liable to cause suffering to one who delights in them, was hard to grasp for meditators anxious to believe that all the work they had done was finally bearing fruit. If they did experience a noticeable shift in their practice, it could easily lead to new forms of conceit.

Don't stick your nose up in the air on account of your practice.  
Don't make too much out of your experiences. Let things peace-

<sup>\*</sup>Malevolent beings. Here the term is used figuratively to refer to defilements.

fully follow their course. Don't get ambitious. There's no need to crave to get or to become anything at all.

On one occasion, a monk came to ask Luang Por why it was that, despite putting great effort into his meditation, he had still never seen the lights and colours that others claimed to see. Luang Por replied:

See light? What do you want to see light for? What good do you think it would do you? If you want to see light, go and look at that fluorescent lamp. That's what light looks like.

After the laughter had died down, he continued:

The majority of meditators are like that. They want to see light and colours. They want to see deities, heaven and hell realms, all those kinds of things. Don't get caught up with that stuff.

#### ONLY THE POSTURE CHANGES

A recurring theme in Luang Por's meditation instructions was the necessity to create a flow of mindfulness and alertness independent of posture. This was the only way that the necessary momentum needed to cut through defilements could be sustained.

Meditation isn't tied to standing or walking or sitting or lying down. As we can't live completely motionless and inactive, we have to incorporate all these four postures into our practice. And the guiding principle to be relied on in each of them is the generation of wisdom and 'rightness'\*'. 'Rightness' means Right View and is another word for wisdom. Wisdom can arise at any time, in any one of the four postures. In each posture, you can think evil thoughts or good thoughts, mistaken thoughts or correct thoughts. Disciples of the Buddha are capable of realizing the Dhamma whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down.

So where does this practice which is carried out in the four postures find its focal point? It finds it in the generation of Right

\* In Thai: ความถูกต้อง

View, because once there is Right View then there comes to be Right Resolve, Right Speech and the rest of the Eightfold Path.

Thus, it would be better to change our way of speaking. Instead of saying that we ‘come out of samādhi’, we should say merely that we ‘change our posture’. Samādhi means stability of mind. When you emerge from samādhi, then maintain that stability in your mindfulness and alertness, in your object, in your actions, all of the time.

It’s incorrect to think that at the end of a meditation session you’ve finished work. Put forth a constant effort. It is through maintaining a constancy of effort in your work, in your actions and in your mindfulness and alertness, that your meditation will develop.

The obstacles that arise during meditation practice change and evolve. The overall tendency is for the obstacles to become more subtle as the practice progresses. But meditators who forgot Luang Por’s constant injunction to take nothing for granted could be blindsided by the unexpected reappearance of coarse defilements that they had assumed were behind them.

One common mistake was to attach to goodness. This could manifest as irritation with the shortcomings of others or else an exaggerated protectiveness of their peace of mind. Luang Por analysed the fault:

You’re afraid that the mind will become defiled, afraid that your samādhi will be destroyed. You feel a strong devotion to the practice, are strongly protective of it; you are very diligent and put forth a lot of effort. When a sense object impinges, then you’re caught out and terrified by it.

Luang Por reassured his disciples that this was a temporary stage that meditators passed through when there was an imbalance in the practice. It would fade away if they recognized that a certain amount of non-peaceful elements in a meditator’s life were, in fact, the raw material for the work of wisdom.

On many occasions, the Buddha enumerated the various supernormal powers that were possible – but not inevitable – bi-products of deep meditation, and the fact that they are, essentially, mundane: their attainment bears no direct causal link to liberation. Of the two great disciples, Ven. Mahā Moggallāna was acknowledged as foremost amongst all the monks who possessed psychic powers, while Ven. Sāriputta was never known to exhibit any at all. Although the Buddha praised arahants who possessed such powers for having realized all that the human mind is capable of, he emphasized that such powers should never be made a goal of practice. Psychic powers such as telepathy may be of some use in teaching the Dhamma, but on the path to liberation, they are at best, tangential, and at worst, obstacles, to the realization of truth.

There have always been a certain number of monks in the Thai Forest Tradition who have possessed psychic powers, although few have been willing to demonstrate or even speak about them. Indeed, the Discipline only permits monks to reveal such abilities to fellow monks. The reason given for this injunction is that while people might be drawn to Buddhism by a display of miraculous powers, the faith that arises from exposure to the marvellous is not the kind that readily translates into the nurturing of wisdom that the Buddha wished to promote. In addition, a monk who reveals psychic powers will draw upon himself a great deal of distracting attention, and thereby both hinder his own path to liberation and threaten the tranquillity of the monastery in which he lives.

Luang Por emphasized that the power of fascination, irrespective of its object, is a serious obstacle to letting go. Fascination with psychic phenomena and unusual abilities binds the mind to *samsāra* every bit as tightly as fascination with coarse sensual pleasures. The acquiring of psychic powers tends to lead to an overestimation of spiritual attainments and a lack of urgency in pushing on further to realize true liberation.

In more intimate meetings with groups of monks, Luang Por would occasionally recount marvellous stories of the psychic powers of the arahants, but afterwards he would make clear that he had spoken for their information and enjoyment and repeated his warning:

Don't pursue them. Don't take any interest in them.

On one occasion, during a conversation with a senior Sri Lankan monk, the talk turned to the subject of psychic powers. Luang Por was asked whether people in Thailand were interested in such matters.

There are people who would like to acquire psychic powers, but myself, I feel that that kind of practice is not in agreement with the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha taught us to abandon every kind of greed, aversion and delusion. Those people's practice leads to the growth of those things.

#### THE CRUST OF LUCID CALM

The word *nimitta* is usually rendered in Buddhist texts as 'sign'. In the context of meditation, it refers to a mental phenomenon which is experienced as a sense perception arising as the mind goes beyond the hindrances. A nimitta is most commonly experienced as a visual form, less often as a sound or tactile sensation, and – rarely – as an odour or taste.

In *The Path of Purification*, nimittas are treated at some length and divided into three categories.\* Entry into *jhāna* is described as being dependent on the meditator shifting focus to a distinctive 'sign', most commonly a bright light, that appears as *samādhi* deepens.

Luang Por and his fellow forest masters were familiar with the treatment of nimittas in *The Path of Purification* but rarely incorporated it in their accounts of the meditation process. They used the term 'nimitta' with a slightly different emphasis. Luang Por employed it in speaking of the mind-made phenomena – colours, lights, visions of beings from other realms – that could appear as the mind became calm. He stressed the importance of maintaining the correct attitude to them. Known for what

\*“The object perceived at the very beginning of concentration is called the preparatory image (*parikamma-nimitta*). The still unsteady and unclear image, which arises when the mind has reached a weak degree of concentration, is called the acquired image (*uggaha-nimitta*). An entirely clear and immovable image arising at a higher degree of concentration is the counter-image (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*).” (*Buddhist Dictionary* by Ven. Nyanatiloka, 1980.)

they were, nimittas were harmless. Obsession with them could lead to a time-wasting detour, and, in extreme cases, to psychosis. Armed with the awareness of their dangers, the basic method of dealing with them was simply to refuse to pay them any attention.

Whatever form the nimitta takes, don't pay attention to it. While it still persists, re-establish your focus by putting all your attention on the breath. Breathe in and out deeply at least three times and that may well cut it off. Just keep re-establishing your concentration. Don't see it as being yours, it is merely a nimitta. Nimittas are deceivers: they make us like, they make us love, they make us fear. They're fake and they're unstable. If one arises, don't give it any significance. It's not yours; don't chase after it.

The most direct and powerful means of letting go of a nimitta was a change of focus from the perception to that which perceived it.

When you see a nimitta, then shift attention to look directly at your mind. Don't abandon this basic principle.

Visions could be alluring, and it was not possible for meditators to simply refuse to take pleasure in them by an act of will. What they could do was to immediately recognize any feelings of pleasure that arose as being changeable and based upon false perception.

Not all nimittas are enamouring. Another common problem that meditators face is being startled and frightened by them.

Prepare your mind with the knowledge that nothing can harm you. If something appears during your meditation and you're frightened by it, then your meditation will come to a halt. If that happens, then bring up the recollection that there is no danger and let it go; don't follow it. Or you may, if you wish, take up the nimitta and investigate its conditioned nature. After you've experienced these things a number of times, you will be unmoved by them. They'll just be normal, nothing to worry about.

There is, however, a class of nimittas that skilled meditators can use to intensify their practice. These include the mental images of parts of the physical body that 'appear to emerge and expand from within the mind',

particularly those that occur after the mind emerges from a deep state of samādhi. Such images are significantly more vivid than any that could be produced by ordinary imagination. Contemplation of them – especially visions of the body in a state of decay – can produce a deep insight into the conditioned nature of phenomena, which in turn may lead to a deep dispassion and abandoning attachment to the sense of an embodied self. These potent images are much more likely to arise if the meditator had already devoted time to investigating the body as a discursive meditation.

Luang Por said that whether or not nimittas could be made use of in the cultivation of wisdom was dependent on the maturity of the meditator. Often, he would recommend a meditator to ignore a nimitta, even if it was of the physical body. One day, a lay meditator came to pay his respects to Luang Por and seek his guidance. He said that while meditating, he would see his body appear as a bleached skeleton floating in front of him. Luang Por explained to him that this is what *The Path of Purification* refers to as the *uggaha-nimitta*, the acquired image. But rather than going on to explain how to manipulate the object in the way the text recommends, he said that there was no need to do so. It was sufficient to create the conditions of stability and calm lucidity for wisdom to do its work. When the mind had been primed by samādhi in this way, any object that arose in the mind was experienced as if it was a question, and the immediate recognition of it as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self, appeared as an effortlessly correct answer.

All that is called for is that you calm the mind sufficiently to provide a foundation for vipassanā. When wisdom has arisen, then as soon as anything occurs in your mind, you are able to deal with it; there is a solution to every problem. You become aware of the problem and its resolution simultaneously, and the problem ends. The knowing is important: if a problem arises without a solution, then you're in trouble, you're not keeping up with what's happening. So you don't have to do a lot of thinking about it; the solution arises in the present moment simultaneously with the problem – even about things that you've never thought about or considered before – without you having to hunt around here and there looking for an answer.

He returned to the point that he would make repeatedly with reference to nimittas: having fully acknowledged the object with equanimity, then turn attention away from the object known, to the knowing itself. By doing so, the object would dissolve.

Don't run after externals, because if you do, then the image will just keep on expanding. Before you know it, the skeleton will have changed into a pig, and then the pig will become a dog, the dog a horse, the horse an elephant; and then they'll all get up and chase each other about! Be aware that what you perceive is a nimitta, the crust of the lucid calm.

#### IV. CALM AND INSIGHT

##### SAMĀDHI

In his expositions of the practice of samādhi, Luang Por usually preferred to avoid speaking in terms of jhānas. Instead he would refer to the various mental states – known as jhāna factors – that constitute these jhānas. His reasoning was that the jhāna factors such as bliss (*sukha*) or equanimity were directly experienceable by the meditator, whereas ‘jhānas’ were simply names for different constellations of these factors. They were, in other words, conventions; and as such, they could lead the mind away from, rather than towards, awareness of the present reality.

If the mind is clear, then it's just like sitting here normally and seeing things around you. Closing the eyes becomes no different from opening them. Seeing while the eyes are closed becomes the same as seeing with the eyes open. There's no doubt about anything at all, merely a sense of wonder, ‘How can these things be possible? It's unbelievable, but there they are.’ There will be sustained appreciation (*vicāra*) arising spontaneously in conjunction with rapture, happiness, a fullness of heart and lucid calm.

Subsequently, the mind will become even more refined, and will be able to discard the meditation object. Now, vitakka, the lifting of the mind onto the object, will be absent and so will *vicāra*. We say the mind discards vitakka and *vicāra*. Actually, it's not

so much that they're discarded; what is really meant is that the mind becomes more concentrated, more compact. When it's calm, then vitakka and vicāra are too coarse to stay within it, and so it's said that they are discarded. Without vitakka lifting the mind to the object, and vicāra to appreciate its nature, there is simply this experience of repleteness, bliss and 'one pointedness' (ekaggatā).

I don't use the terms first, second, third and fourth jhāna. I speak only of lucid calm and of vitakka, vicāra, rapture, bliss and unity, and of their progressive abandonment until only equanimity remains. This development is called the power of samādhi, the natural expressions of the mind that has realized lucid calm ... So there is a gradual movement in stages, that depends on constant and frequent practice.

Once, Luang Por was asked about the relationship between the first four jhāna factors and the fifth (ekaggatā), usually translated into Thai as meaning 'single-focused', and in English as 'one-pointed'. He replied that 'ekaggatā' was like a bowl and the other four factors were like the fruit in the bowl.

A cat watching a mouse hole has a kind of samādhi and so does a safe-cracker, but theirs is a natural, amoral concentration of instinct and desire, not the samādhi that issues from a disciplined gathering of inner forces and which provides the foundation of wisdom. The Buddha distinguished between 'Right Samādhi' (*sammāsamādhi*), an essential element of the path to liberation, and 'wrong samādhi' (*micchāsamādhi*), which leads away from it. Luang Por explained that the term 'wrong samādhi' included any state of calm that lacked the awareness necessary to create the foundation for insight:

Samādhi can be divided into two kinds: wrong samādhi and right samādhi. Take good notice of this distinction. In wrong samādhi the mind is unwavering. It enters a calmness which is completely silent and lacking all awareness. You can be in that state for a couple of hours or even all day, but during that time you have no idea where you've got to or what the state of your mind is. This

is wrong samādhi. It's like a knife that you've sharpened well and then just put away without using. You gain no benefit from it. It is a deluded calm that lacks alertness. You think that you've reached the end of the practice of meditation and don't search for anything more. It's a danger, an enemy. At this stage, it's dangerous to you because it prevents wisdom from arising. There can be no wisdom without a sense of moral discrimination.

Right samādhi could be known by the clarity of awareness.

No matter how deep Right Samādhi becomes, it is always accompanied by awareness. There is a perfect mindfulness and alertness, a constant knowing. Right Samādhi is a kind of samādhi that never leads you astray. This is a point that practitioners should clearly understand. You can never dispense with the knowing. For it to be Right Samādhi, the knowing must be present from the beginning right until the end. Please keep observing this.

On another occasion, he said that inner peace could be divided into two kinds: coarse and subtle. The coarse kind occurred when the meditator identified with the bliss that arose from samādhi practice and assumed the bliss to be the essential element of the peace. The subtle peace was the fruit of wisdom, and it occurred when the experience of the mind itself, as that which knows all transient pleasant and unpleasant experiences, was understood to be the true peace.

The pleasant and the unpleasant are states of being, states we are born into, expressions of attachment. As long as we attach to the pleasant or unpleasant, there can be no liberation from saṃsāra. The bliss of samādhi is not true inner peace. That peace comes through dwelling in the awareness of the true nature of the pleasant and unpleasant without attachment. Thus, it is taught that the mind that lies beyond the pleasant (*sukha*) and the unpleasant (*dukkha*) is the true goal of Buddhism.

Sometimes, Luang Por made use of the commentarial division of samādhi into three levels, as these were clearly distinguishable on the basis of duration and intensity:

- Momentary (*khaṇīka*) samādhi – The initial, short-lived intervals of calm, experienced as the mind becomes focused on its object.
- Access (*upacāra*) samādhi – The state in which the five hindrances have been overcome but not securely so. There is still some background movement in the mind, but it is not distracting.
- Absorption (*appanā*) samādhi – The deepest level of samādhi, a bright stillness in which no sense data appears to the mind or is so fleeting and peripheral as to be inconsequential.

Access samādhi is the state in which the wisdom faculty functions most fluently. It precedes and succeeds attainment of absorption samādhi. The access that follows absorption is a more potent base for wisdom development than that which precedes it. Luang Por compared the mind in access samādhi to a chicken in a coop, not completely still but moving in a clearly defined area, and unable to run off at will. On other occasions, he said it is as if the mind is enclosed within a glass dome. The mind is aware of sense impressions, but is not affected by them. It is the state, he said, in which the mind can see things in their true light:

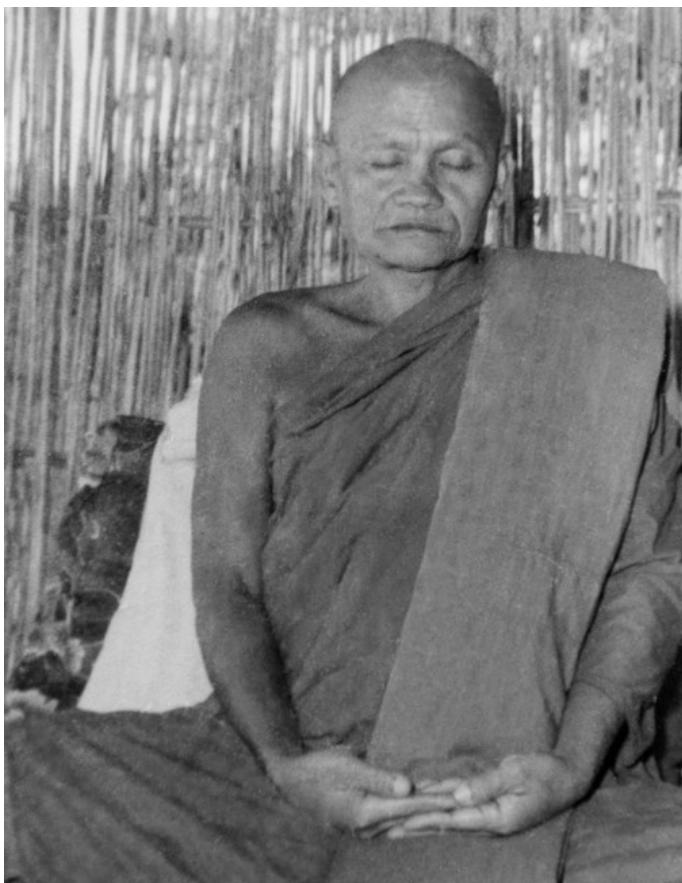
Having abided in the state of complete lucid calm for a sufficient time, the mind withdraws from it to contemplate the nature of external conditions in order to give rise to wisdom.

## THINKING AND EXAMINATION

The common Thai word ‘*pijarana*’ can mean ‘consider’, ‘reflect upon’, ‘contemplate’, ‘examine’ or ‘investigate’, and is found extensively in the teachings of the Thai forest masters. On some occasions, Luang Por equated ‘*pijarana*’ with *dhammavicaya*, the ‘investigation of Dhamma’ that arises in dependence on mindfulness and constitutes the second of the seven enlightenment factors (*bojjhaṅga*). All Buddhists are encouraged to reflect on (or *pijarana*) the truths of old age, sickness, death, the inevitability of separation from all that is loved, and the law of *kamma*. By doing so again and again, these truths sink into the mind and become elements of the Right View that must underlie effective meditation practice. *Pijarana* is

also used in the context of discursive meditation practices to mean the examination of a theme of Dhamma in a coherent and disciplined manner.

Whereas the nature and role of pijarana in discursive meditations is straightforward, meditators can often doubt the part it plays in developing insight into the three characteristics, which constitutes the culmination of Buddhist meditation practices.



What degree of intentionality was Luang Por advocating when he instructed his disciples to pijarana the three characteristics? How could meditators be sure that they were not merely thinking about the three characteristics rather than developing insight into them?

It's a little bit hard to appreciate this because of its similarity to mental proliferation, and when thoughts arise you may assume that your mind is no longer calm. In fact, the thoughts and perceptions that occur at this time arise within the calm. Examination that takes place within the calm does not disturb it. Sometimes the body may be taken up for examination. That doesn't mean you start thinking or speculating: it's a process that occurs naturally in that state of calm. There is awareness within the calm, calm within awareness. If it was merely mental proliferation, it would not be calm, it would be disturbing. This isn't proliferation. It is something that appears in the mind as a result of the calm and is called examination (*pijarana*). Wisdom arises right here.

Luang Por clarified this point in conversation with a visiting group of American Dhamma teachers. He said that ordinary thinking could be distinguished by the fact that, although it might remain focused on a topic, it was coarse and lacking in penetration. When the mind became calm, the examination (*pijarana*) arose naturally as a kind of awareness that, while possessing some of the characteristics of thinking, was of a different order. Wise reflection on the three characteristics could be distinguished by the fact that it remained uncorrupted by mental proliferation, was always wholesome, and caused defilements to fade from the mind. Mere thinking, on the other hand, becomes absorbed by defilements and contributes to their increase. The examination that Luang Por was advocating was distinguished by the letting go of attachments:

Ordinary thinking has already been filtered out. If you don't know the examination for what it is, it will turn into conceptual thought; if you do know, it will turn into wisdom – that is, it will look on everything that arises as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self.

This wisdom or wise reflection, he said, would gradually mature into *vipassanā*. In contrast to much contemporary use of the term, Luang Por tended to use '*vipassanā*' to refer to the insight that arises from wise reflection rather than the reflection itself. *Vipassanā* was not, he said, something contrived, not something you *did*. *Vipassanā* was the

discernment of the three characteristics that arose naturally in the mind when all the necessary causes and conditions for it had been cultivated. The intensity of this clear seeing could vary from a weak insight to a comprehensive vision of the way things are.

The degree of calm necessary before this investigation of the three characteristics could take place was not measurable. When Luang Por was asked, ‘How much calm is needed?’, he replied, ‘As much as is necessary.’ In other words, meditators were to proceed by trial-and-error and closely observe the results of their efforts until they knew for themselves. If the contemplation degenerated into mental proliferation, then the mind was obviously not strong enough to do the work of wisdom.

Meditators had different faculties. Some people found it easy to let go of thinking, but found that the very qualities that made such letting go possible, also retarded the cultivation of wisdom. Others, of a more reflective bent, found that their mind’s gift for contemplation prevented them entering deep states of samādhi, but they were able to penetrate the truth through a close, focused attention on the conditioned nature of phenomena.

To illustrate this point, Luang Por adapted two terms from the Suttas – ‘cetovimutti’ (liberation of mind) and ‘paññāvimutti’ (liberation through wisdom). He applied these terms to two paths of practice: one that emphasised the power of mind, i.e. samādhi, and the other that emphasised wisdom. While wisdom-liberation character types were especially sharp and perceptive, the mind-liberation character types needed to take their time and go over the same ground many times before they understood. He gave an analogy:

It’s like two people going to look at a cloth pattern for a few minutes. One of them understands the pattern immediately and can go away and reproduce it from memory. This is ‘liberation through wisdom’. The other person, the mind-liberation character, has to sit and ponder on the details of the pattern and go back for further checks. With mind-liberation, you have to work with the mind a fair amount, you have to develop quite a lot of samādhi. The first person doesn’t need to do all that. He looks

at the design, understands the principle and then goes off and draws it himself; he has no doubts. Both paths reach the goal, but they have different features.

Liberation through wisdom is always accompanied by mindfulness and alertness. When anything emerges in the mind, then it knows; it knows, and then lets go with ease. The mind-liberation person can't see things as they emerge in that way, he has to investigate them – which is also a valid path. Know your own character. In the first case, some people may not realize that there is samādhi present. You walk along observing, and samādhi – meaning firm stability of mind – is inherently present. For someone with wisdom, it's not difficult. He just develops enough samādhi to create a foundation. It's like students reaching grade twelve at school. Now they can choose which subject they want to specialize in. Whoever wants to go on to study agriculture does that and so on. It is the point of separation. Samādhi is the same. It reaches its destination in this same way.

#### THE WORK OF WISDOM

If the mind was able to enter access samādhi but consistently refused to go deeper, then the investigation of phenomena could begin. The theme that Luang Por would usually suggest to investigate at this point was the thirty-two parts of the body, or else, the first five – head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth and skin – or, whichever part suits one:

In meditation, it's not necessary to visualize a lot of things; we visualize only things that will give rise to wisdom. We need to look from the top of the head right down to the soles of the feet and from the soles of the feet up to the top of the head. What is this? How real is it? Why do people attach to it so tenaciously? Why are we so concerned about it? What's the reason? What does this body consist of? We investigate all these things until we see them in their true light as 'just that much'. As soon as you see that, understand that, then the grasping on to things as, 'Oh! I love this so much' or, 'I hate it so much' withdraws from the mind.

Some meditators would find that the investigation of the body or the arising and passing away of sense data would give rise to a rapture that would push the mind over the edge into a state of lucid calm. The mind would then alternate between resting and recharging its powers in the lucid calm and doing the work of wisdom.

A common anxiety was that with the development of deep samādhi, the bliss and sense of completeness that would ensue would be too absorbing to abandon in order to investigate the three characteristics. Luang Por's answer was that it was indeed a genuine danger for meditators with wrong view or who developed samādhi in an imbalanced way. However, when the time was ripe, and with the meditator's emphasis placed firmly on mindfulness and alertness, samādhi, if correctly developed, would turn naturally to the work of wisdom.

Look after what you've already developed and intensify your mindfulness. If you give more importance to mindfulness than to anything else, then you won't go wrong: it is the correct way to put forth effort. If your mindfulness is still not fully matured, you must try to increase it so that you have the measure of everything that occurs in your mind. Knowledge will arise whenever mindfulness becomes clear and bright, because wisdom depends on this ability to be aware of everything that passes through your mind. So that's it: if you have mindfulness, it will give birth to wisdom and you will clearly see and understand. Without mindfulness, you don't know where your mind has gone.

Develop as much mindfulness as you can. It is of immense value in upholding your awareness and maintaining it on the path of peace. Mindfulness is the Buddha himself supporting and cautioning us. We become Buddha-like when we have mindfulness, because the mind is awake, it knows, it sees and it is restrained. Restraint and composure arise through mindfulness. Wherever defilements still lurk unseen, it's because the flaws in your mindfulness allow them to evade you. But whenever mindfulness becomes clear, then the mind and your wisdom become radiant.

So don't make too much out of things, don't attach to ideas of self and other; just keep putting forth effort. My advice is to simply carry on like that, and as long as nothing comes up, then there's no need for any investigation. Carry on normally as if you were walking along a road or sweeping the house. When you're sweeping, you keep going without looking around at anything else. It's only if someone calls your name, and you know that there's some business to be seen to, that you look up; without interruptions, you just carry on with your sweeping.

Similarly, in meditation, only when something comes up should you investigate. Otherwise, merely contemplate your present experience. Simply maintain the mindfulness to be aware of that. If nothing comes up, then rest at ease. But that doesn't mean just letting things go their way and ignoring them. There is care and attention. You're aware of whatever passes through the mind, but you don't need a lot of investigation. When something impinges at one of the sense doors and, in turn, impinges on the mind, then keep watch on it. If you don't lose sight of it, you'll see it as 'just that much', and then you can return to where you were. Don't run away from that place because, if you do, before long you'll find yourself carried off to heaven and hell. Be careful.

Luang Por illustrated this point with a simile: meditators should be like a spider at the centre of its web. The spider remains still and wakeful until an insect gets caught in the web. It then darts out, deals with the insect and returns to its still space.

One common view of meditation practice is that the deeper levels of samādhi are unnecessary for liberation: that momentary samādhi provides a sufficient base for the development of vipassanā. When asked about this on one occasion, Luang Por replied with an analogy:

You have to walk all the way to Bangkok, so that you know what Bangkok is like. Don't just go as far as Korat\*. Even if you're going to go and live in Korat, go on to Bangkok. Then you'll understand exactly how developed Korat is. Go all the way to Bangkok and

\* A city halfway between Ubon and Bangkok.

you'll have passed through Ubon, Korat and Bangkok. So, with samādhi, if your mind will go all the way, then let it, so that it can know the whole samādhi lineage. Access samādhi is the same as only going as far as Korat.

Extending the analogy, he compared the briefness of momentary samādhi to running through a town, and the longer duration of access samādhi to strolling about the town on frequent visits, repeating his frequent definition of that state as 'examination within the peace':

Sometimes the mind stops at one point of the examination and enters into appanā. At that moment, it abandons khanika and upacāra, it abandons everything and goes deep inside – where it's released from all things. But that appanā develops from khanika and upacāra samādhi. You have to pass through them first, otherwise you won't reach it.

Athough Luang Por occasionally made use of Pali technical terms, it was not his preferred way of talking about the mind. On being asked how a meditator should assess what level of samādhi had been reached, he replied that it was better to be simply aware of the state of mind itself without reaching for its Pali title:

Whatever level it is, the clear awareness that your mind is in a state of lucid calm will suffice. Clearly see that the mind has truly stopped. Are you confident that the mind is pure and bright? You have to be your own guarantor of that. With such an awareness, you don't have to worry about whether it's appanā or khanika or whatever. Don't bother with all of that, it's a waste of time. It's better to simply look at your mind and the truth of what you see.

## SAMATHA AND VIPASSANĀ

In the Theravada tradition, most of the discourse concerning the two chief aspects of Buddhist meditation practice – the calming of the mind and the cultivation of wisdom – has revolved around the terms 'samatha' and 'vipassanā'. 'Samatha' means 'tranquillity, serenity, lucid calm'. 'Vipassanā' literally means 'clear seeing' and refers to insight into the three characteristics of existence. Although the Buddha himself did not use

these terms with any great frequency, they gained much prominence in the centuries following his death, their meaning expanded to include not only the states themselves, but also the practices directly aimed at cultivating them. Focusing on a mantra, for example, came to be called a samatha practice, whereas investigating the impermanent nature of feelings, a vipassanā practice. The two terms have long been the subject of scholarly controversy. Disagreements have tended to centre on the relationship between the two; in particular, as mentioned in an earlier section, the extent to which the lucid calm of samatha must be developed before an authentic vipassanā insight can occur.

When referring to these terms, Luang Por would speak of them as two aspects of practice that were developed in unison, rather than two separate entities\*. Just as an axe needed to be made with both sufficient weight and sharpness to do its job, so the mind that could penetrate the truth of things needed both stability and discernment. Nevertheless, given that the focus in the early stages of practice is suppression of the hindrances and, in its culminating phase, insight into the nature of things, Luang Por recognized a shift of emphasis which he would characterize as an organic process of maturation. It occurred the way, he said, that an unripe mango became ripe, or a child became an adult. From one point of view, the adult might be seen as an altogether different person to the child; and from another, as an evolved version of the same person. In a similar, but more earthy analogy, Luang Por compared the relationship to that between food and excrement.

Luang Por also coined the terms ‘pacification of mind’ and ‘pacification of defilements’ to clarify his view of the necessary relationship between samatha and vipassanā:

When we develop samādhi, we pacify the mind. But the life of the pacified mind is short. Because it can't withstand a lot of things going on, it lacks true ease. You go to a quiet place and pacify your mind. But the defilements are still there; they haven't been pacified. This is where the distinction can be made. The

\*Generally, Luang Por would use samatha and samādhi, vipassanā and wisdom, interchangeably.

pacification of the mind and the pacification of the defilements are two different things.

The mind can become peaceful easily enough when there are few disturbances. But if it feels some kind of threat, then it can't. There's something still there. You can't let go, you can't put it down.

Meditators who took refuge in refined states of mind and feared anything that might disturb the bliss of their samādhi, tended to become trapped in doomed attempts to manipulate conditions in order to maintain them. The boldness required to look closely at forms, sounds, odours, tastes, tangible objects and mental states would be lacking in them, and their defilements left untouched. In contrast, meditators, at peace after a training in which the calming and wisdom elements had been developed in tandem, would have no fear of sense contact as such and could let go of attachment at the moment of contact with great fluency. They created no owner of their experience. Luang Por said at this stage the practice was fitting to be called *vipassanā*, clear seeing of things in their true light:

These conventional expressions: *samatha* and *vipassanā* – if you want to discuss them separately you can. But if you want to talk about their relationship, then you have to say that they're inseparable, they're connected. A layperson once came and asked me if these days I was teaching people to practise *samatha* or *vipassanā*. I said, 'I don't know, they're trained together.' If you answer in terms of what actually happens in the mind, then you have to answer like that. Develop them simultaneously, because they are synonymous. If you develop *samādhi* without wisdom, it won't last long.

In one of his most celebrated discourses, Luang Por captured this idea with a simile:

Wisdom is the movement of *samādhi*. It's like the phrase 'still flowing water'. The *samatha* and *vipassanā* of someone who has developed right practice are in harmony and concord, and flow like a single stream of water. In the mind of the practitioner, it's as if still water is flowing. The peace of *samādhi* incorporates

wisdom. There is sīla, samādhi and paññā together. Wherever you sit, it is still and yet it flows. It is still flowing water. There is samādhi and paññā, samatha and vipassanā.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF INSIGHT

On one occasion, Luang Por taught about the development of insight in terms of the two jhāna factors of vitakka and vicāra. He said that with the mind in a state of calm, a thought might arise (vitakka), prompting appreciation of it (vicāra) resulting in rapture, which would then propel the mind into a deeper state of lucid calm. On the passing away of that state, the appreciation could resume.

If you maintain awareness, you'll get a report from the scene. It's similar to there being a person in a house with six windows. You stand outside watching the windows. From outside you see someone appearing at one window and then someone else at another and you assume that there's six people in the house. In fact, it's all just the one person moving from window to window. That one person is named 'Three Characteristics'. Everything is unstable. The three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self are the object of vipassanā. Penetrating them will cut off all doubts.

As the practice of contemplating whatever phenomena arose in the calm, lucid mind as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self progressed, the meditator would experience a disjunction between the knowing and that which was known.

It's not that you have to force this disjunction. Through the abandonment, the putting down of attachment, the mind and its object become automatically disjoined.

At this stage, Luang Por said that the distinction between the mind and its present object was like that between water and oil. The separation allowed for a constant examination of phenomena.

If you take your mind to this point, wherever you go, the mind will be analyzing. This is the 'enlightenment factor' called 'invest-

igation of Dhamma'. It rolls along by itself, and you talk with yourself, you resolve and release the feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness that arise. Nothing can get close to the mind; it has its work to do. This happens naturally. It's not something that you can contrive.

He said that it was at this stage that the Buddha's teachings on the foundations of mindfulness\* became clear. When the membrane connecting the knowing from the known had been cut, then the meditator saw 'the body in the body', 'feelings in feelings', 'states of mind in states of mind', and 'wholesome and unwholesome dhammas in wholesome and unwholesome dhammas'. In other words, they were seen clearly for what they were, without superimposing upon them an independent, self-existent owner.

#### ATTAINMENTS

At a certain stage in meditation practice, the 'defilements of insight'\*\* may arise. Here, unenlightened meditators come to mistakenly believe that intensely positive mental states, such as illumination and bliss, are indications of enlightenment.

You attach to the goodness that arises in your practice. You attach to the purity. You attach to the knowledge. This is called 'vipassanā'.\*\*\*

Through the practise of meditation, defilements can be so effectively suppressed that they may seem to have been completely eradicated. As a result, meditators can develop an unshakeable self-confidence in their perceptions. If their teacher refuses to accept the validity of their assumed enlightenment, they interpret it as either a sad misjudgement on the teacher's part, or else as jealousy.

\*See Glossary, 808.

\*\**Vipassanupakkilesā*. A list of ten states first appears in Paṭis 2.100. It consists of illumination, knowledge, rapture, tranquillity, bliss, resolution, exertion, assurance, equanimity and decisiveness.

\*\*\*Luang Por's own coinage, intended, for rhetorical purposes, to form a pair with *vipassanā*.

Strong measures may be needed in such cases and a short, sharp shock is usually the recommended cure. In the commentaries, there are stories of awakened monks disabusing others of their delusions by mentally projecting hologram-like moving images of elephants in rut or alluring women in front of them. Caught by surprise, the monk who had believed himself to have transcended lust and fear of death is suddenly made painfully aware that the defilements have only been driven underground and are still lying latent in his mind.

Luang Por would tell the story of Luang Por Pao, who replied to a nun's declaration that she had become a stream enterer with a curt, 'Eugh, a bit better than a dog.' In Thailand, comparing a human being to a dog is considered extremely offensive. The shock and anger that arose in the *maechee*, when spoken to in this unexpected way, immediately punctured her conceit.

Luang Por once used the same method with a similar result when a maechee at Wat Pah Pong mistakenly believed that she had attained a stage of enlightenment. He listened silently to her claim and then, with his face a stern mask, said coldly: 'Liar.'

It was one of the subjects on which Luang Por could be fierce:

Don't ever allow yourself to get puffed up. Whatever you become, don't make anything of it. If you become a stream-enterer, then leave it at that. If you become an arahant, then leave it at that. Live simply, keep performing beneficial deeds, and wherever you are, you'll be able to live a normal life. There's no need to go boasting to anybody that you've attained this or become that.

#### BEYOND THE MONKEY

One sign that the practice was on the right path was the feeling of sober sadness that arose through constant contemplation of the three characteristics, which evolves into '*nibbida*' or disenchantment.

An illumination takes place and then disenchantment sets in: disenchantment with this body and mind; disenchantment with things that arise and pass away and are unstable. You feel it

wherever you are. When the mind is disenchanted, its sole interest is in finding the way out of all those things ... It sees the suffering inherent in the world, the suffering inherent in life. When the mind has entered this state, then wherever you sit there's nothing but impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. There's nowhere to take hold of anything anymore. If you sit at the foot of a tree, you hear a discourse from the Buddha. If you go to a mountain, you hear a discourse from the Buddha. You see all trees as just one tree. You see all creatures as of one species. You see that nothing deviates from this truth: that all things come into existence, become established, begin to change and then cease.

Luang Por made clear that the disenchantment that he was referring to was not an expression of aversion, for that would have been simply another expression of craving. This disenchantment was the feeling that arose through seeing how mistaken it had been to consider impermanent phenomena as self or belonging to self. It was waking up from the enchantment of body and mind.

This is not the monkey feeling disenchanted. It's feeling disenchanted with being a monkey.

Luang Por maintained that 'mai nae' – awareness of the present mental object as changeful, fluid, unreliable, of uncertain outcome – was the unerring guide right from the very beginning of meditation practice until its final conclusion. When mental objects were recognized as 'changeful', he said, it was like breaching the boat of conceit below the waterline. The sense 'I am' listed to one side and sunk.

Luang Por taught that complete liberation of the mind was the result of creating a momentum where the tirelessly repeated inner contemplation of the three characteristics, in a mind freed from the hindrances, was complemented by a steady effort to be mindful and alert to the three characteristics in daily life. Eventually, the constant repetition and increased profundity of the contemplation reached a tipping point and bore fruit.

Although Luang Por was reticent about talking in detail about the higher stages of practice, he did, on occasion, make some important observations.

In one of his discourses, he described the case of the meditator who has ‘a glimpse of Nibbāna’ but is unable to fully integrate his understanding and has to return to the work of wisdom until the mind is fully mature:

It’s like someone who is in the middle of stepping across a stream – with one foot on the near bank and the other on the far side. They know for sure that there are two sides to the stream but are unable to cross over it completely, and so, they step back. The understanding that there exist two sides to the stream is similar to that of the *Gotrabhū puggala* or the *Gotrabhū citta*\*. It means that you know the way to go beyond the defilements but are still unable to go there, and so, you step back. Once you know for yourself that this state truly exists, this knowledge remains with you constantly as you continue to practise meditation and develop your *pāramī*\*\*. You are both certain of the goal and the most direct way to reach it.

Right View has been established; the meditator knows the right and the wrong way of practice. They steer between the extremes of pleasure and pain and gradually move down the path of equanimity, but still make mistakes. They know that treading on thorns is painful, but they still can’t always avoid doing so. But through constantly laying aside the tendency to attach to all that is pleasant and unpleasant in the world of experience, insight deepens until finally they become a ‘knower of the worlds’.

When the mind has completely seen through ‘personality view’, all doubts and attachments to precepts and practices disappear, and now the mind of the practitioner is ‘in the world, but not of it’. Luang Por made a comparison with the natural separation of oil and paint in a bottle:

You are living in the world and following the conventions of the world, but without attaching to them. When you have to go somewhere, you say you are going; when you are coming, you

\*‘*Gotrabhū*’ means ‘change of lineage’, i.e. between the unenlightened and enlightened.

\*\*Spiritual accomplishments. The Theravada tradition recognises ten: generosity, virtue, wisdom, renunciation, effort, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity.

say you are coming. Whatever you are doing, you use the conventions and language of the world, but it's like the two liquids in the bottle – they are in the same bottle but don't mix together. You live in the world, but at the same time you remain separate from it.



The mind doesn't create things around sense contact. Once contact has occurred, you automatically let go. The mind discards the experience. This means that if you are attracted to something, you experience the attraction in the mind but don't attach or hold on fast to it. If you have a reaction of aversion, there is simply the experience of aversion arising in the mind and nothing more: there isn't any sense of self arising that attaches and gives meaning and importance to the aversion. In other words, the mind knows how to let go; it knows how to set things aside. Why is it able to let go and put things down? Because the presence of insight means you can clearly see the harmful results that come from attaching to all those mental states.

When you see forms, the mind remains undisturbed; when you hear sounds, it remains undisturbed. The mind neither takes a position for or against any sense objects experienced. This is the same for all sense contact, whether it be through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body or mind. Whatever thoughts arise in the mind can't disturb you. You are able to let go. You may perceive something as desirable, but you don't attach to that perception or give it any special importance – it simply becomes a condition of mind to be observed without attachment. This is what the Buddha described as experiencing sense objects as 'just that much'. The sense bases are still functioning and experiencing sense objects, but without the process of attachment stimulating movements to and fro in the mind.

Having gained such clear and penetrating insight means it is sustained at all times, whether you are sitting meditation with your eyes closed, or even if you are doing something with your eyes open. Whatever situation you find yourself in, be it in formal

meditation or not, the clarity of insight remains. When you have unwavering mindfulness of the mind within the mind, you don't forget yourself. Whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down, the awareness within makes it impossible to lose mindfulness. It's a state of awareness that prevents you forgetting yourself. Mindfulness has become so strong that it is self-sustaining to the point where it becomes the natural state of the mind. These are the results of training and cultivating the mind, and it is here where you go beyond doubt.

Luang Por said that realizing that the constant arising and passing away of all phenomena in accordance with causes and conditions is a fixed, invariable truth, is to find the only kind of permanence that exists. Realizing this truth of an unchanging changefulness is, he said, 'the end of the path that needs to be followed'. In terms of the Four Noble Truths – the framework for all of Luang Por's practice and teaching – by bringing the eight factors of the Noble Path to maturity, suffering is comprehended; and with the factors sustaining suffering abandoned, suffering ceases. Luang Por said:

It is as if an arrow has been pulled out of your heart.





VII  
*polishing the shell*

*Abandoning the dark way, let the wise cultivate the bright path. Having gone from home to homelessness, let them yearn for that delight in detachment, so difficult to enjoy. Giving up sensual pleasures, with no attachment, let the wise cleanse themselves of defilements of mind.*

*Dhp 87-88*

# *Polishing the Shell*

## *Monk's Training*

*Household life is cramped and dusty; life gone forth is wide open. It is difficult for a householder to lead the Holy Life as completely pure as a polished conch shell. Suppose I shave off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and go forth from the home life into homelessness.*

MN 112

*Monks, there are ten dhammas which should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth. What are these ten?*

1. ‘I am no longer living according to worldly aims and values.’ This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.
2. ‘My very life is sustained through the gifts of others.’ This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.
3. ‘There is still more work to be done.’ This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.
4. ‘Does regret over my conduct arise in my mind?’ This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.
5. ‘Could my spiritual companions find fault with my conduct?’ This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

6. ‘All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.’ This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.
7. ‘I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma, abide supported by my kamma; whatever kamma I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.’ This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.
8. ‘The days and nights are relentlessly passing; how well am I spending my time?’ This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.
9. ‘Do I delight in solitude or not?’ This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.
10. ‘Has my practice borne fruit with freedom or insight so that at the end of my life I need not feel ashamed when questioned by my spiritual companions?’ This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

Monks, these are the ten dhammas to be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

AN 10.48

## I. INTRODUCTION

Luang Por Chah chose to live his life as a Buddhist monk. He received permission from his parents to enter a monastery at the age of nine, and apart from a brief period in his teens, he lived in monastic communities until his death at the age of seventy-four. The Sangha was his family, and, as a teacher, its welfare was his main pre-occupation. While he gave considerable importance to propagating the Dhamma in society at large, he did so only to the extent that it did not compromise his training of the monks and nuns in his monastery.

Luang Por considered that the longevity and good health of Buddhism in a society was ultimately decided by the quality of the monastic order.

He spent much of his life providing a training for monastics that was intended to be true to the ancient principles, but that would, at the same time, also enable the Sangha to thrive in a Thailand that was rapidly changing. Perhaps most crucially, he sought to create a Sangha that was not overly tied to him as an individual but would still be able to thrive in his eventual absence.

When Luang Por established Wat Pah Pong in 1954, there were few precedents for him to draw upon, no clear-cut forest monastery template passed down by his teachers to conform to. Scarcely a decade had passed since Luang Pu Mun himself – the father of the tradition – had first spent two consecutive Rains Retreats in the same monastery. Nevertheless, it seems evident that Luang Por had been preparing for this new development in his life for some time, closely observing the way things were done in every monastery he practised in during his *tudong* years. He began with great confidence, establishing a monastery based broadly upon Luang Pu Mun's monastery at Nong Peu, but also introducing certain adaptations inspired by practices he had seen elsewhere, and others from his own ideas. From the beginning, he showed a willingness to learn from experience and discard what did not work.

#### CHAFF FROM THE GRAIN

One of the distinctive features of the Wat Pah Pong training was the unusually long time – in some periods almost two years<sup>\*</sup> – that aspirants lived in the monastery first as postulants and then as novices before taking full Ordination. This was a radically different approach to that found in the village and city monasteries. Screening applicants for admission into the Sangha and requiring them to spend a probationary period as postulants may seem to be a matter of common sense, but it was virtually unknown at the time. In most monasteries, applicants could expect to be wearing a monk's robes within days of walking through the gate, a custom that contributed significantly to low standards throughout the monastic order. A probationary period served to make Ordination seem more valuable.

<sup>\*</sup>By the end of his teaching career the length of time was much shorter.

Luang Por expressed his view on the matter in a characteristically succinct phrase: ‘Easy to ordain, easy to disrobe. Difficult to ordain, difficult to disrobe.’

At Wat Pah Pong, those unsuited for monastic life usually left well before the ceremony of Ordination. New people were tested from the first day. A freshly arrived applicant for Ordination at Wat Pah Pong would spend the first few days in a state of some confusion, receiving little attention and sleeping at night on a rush mat at the back of the Dhamma Hall. Ajahn Tiang recalled:

“Luang Por would leave the newly arrived people alone. He didn’t speak to them apart from asking them how they were now and then. Whether they did things right or wrong he said nothing. He’d just leave them for about a week or five days or three days – depending on the circumstance – and then he would speak. I thought it was an excellent method to get an idea of the person’s intelligence. Was he aware of what was going on around him? Was he being observant? Or was he foolish, unobservant or impulsive? Once Luang Por had grasped his weak points, his basic personality, then he would start to teach and train him.”

Ajahn Jundee, one of those who passed through this process with distinction, saw others leave after a few days:

“Luang Por was unconcerned. His attitude was: whoever wants to come, let them come; whoever wants to leave, then let them leave. It didn’t affect him. I came as a layperson, and I was here for around ten days before anybody said anything to me. The monks and novices didn’t speak to me or teach me anything, or ask me to help with anything at all. I thought, ‘Why am I being left to my own devices like this? I’ve just been abandoned.’ Sometimes I started to feel miserable and considered going home. It seemed from the way that everybody was behaving that nobody was interested in me.”

Realizing that the onus was upon him to make the effort to watch those around him closely and copy them in whatever he could, Ajahn Jundee’s willingness to learn was noticed and his life in the monastery soon began to change for the better.

After some days, the applicant would be told that he could now shave his head, signifying an initial commitment to the abandonment of vanity and the practice of renunciation. He would then formally request the Eight Precepts and begin wearing the white lower robe and *angsa* of the postulant. From this point his training would begin. He would join in most of the Sangha's communal activities, assist the monks, and start to learn the daily chants.

"I wanted to ordain quickly, but Luang Por explained about the training of new people, and it made sense to me ... He was quite stern with my group ... He said he wasn't going to let us ordain easily. He would train us like soldiers. We had come to be soldiers of the Buddha, and we needed some basic training, like army boot camp. It might take many months or even a year if we weren't any good ... For those who badly wanted to ordain it took the wind out of their sails. In those days, he aimed at quality above all. He wasn't bothered by the reactions of the people who came; he wanted to test their faith.

"The smarter people ordained more quickly because they were fluent, able to do everything in a neat, correct way. Others were there for a year or two and they still weren't ready. If they could endure, they stayed; if they couldn't, they left. He didn't ever try to persuade anyone to stay ... Some people would arrive saying they were tired of the world, they'd had their fill of it; but then they came up against the monastic regulations and a single day was enough. By the next morning they'd changed their minds and left. Although it was true they came with faith, they lacked wisdom. Some didn't even pay respects before they left - they just ran away. Some people stayed a bit longer, shaved their heads and then left. I know so many people who were unable to endure it."

Anyone who expressed desire or showed impatience in Luang Por's presence could expect to pay a price. If a new member of the community wanted to ordain as soon as possible, the worst thing that he could do would be to request a date from Luang Por or (almost unthinkable except, perhaps, for one of the Westerners) to pester him. The question, 'Luang Por, when will I be ordained?' would be either completely ignored or dismissed with a, 'Don't bother' or, 'It's not really necessary; just carry on as you are.' Only when Luang Por saw that the eager aspirant was at peace

with whatever his teacher decided, did he arrange for an Ordination. One of the most valuable phrases a new member of the community could learn at Wat Pah Pong was, ‘It’s up to you, Luang Por.’ It meant that he trusted Luang Por’s judgement and could be patient for however long it took.

## GOING FORTH

Novice Ordination has traditionally been the de facto option for males below the age of twenty, with men of twenty years or above taking full monk Ordination without becoming novices first. Luang Por was unusual in that, for a number of years, he required men of all ages to spend a period of months as a novice before becoming monks. It gave aspirants for monkhood the chance to develop a feel for Sangha life with many of the trappings of life as a monk but without the immediate pressure of having to conform to a large, complex body of training rules. Eventually, he relaxed this practice somewhat, but retained it for Westerners and elderly men who benefited from this gentle introduction to Sangha life.

The novice Ordination ceremony (*pabbajā*; literally: ‘Going Forth’) is short. The aspirant receives robes from the teacher, makes his formal request to ‘go forth’, receives the Ten Precepts\* from the teacher, and recites the list of the five basic meditation topics: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin. On one such ‘Going Forth’ ceremony, Luang Por gave the following instruction:

The only reason that I make it so difficult for all of you to enter the Sangha here is that I want things to be done well ... Taking the time is the proof of your commitment. Some people want to become monks, but then when they find out that it takes a long time, they change their minds. Some bear with it, some leave and seek to become monks elsewhere. I have no objections to that. But what I have always insisted upon is that becoming a monk is not taken lightly.

As postulants, you’ve trained and prepared yourselves to become a monk. You’ve lived with the monks, learned how to offer things

\*See Glossary, 822.

to them correctly, learned about the monk's life, become acquainted with it. You've practised sewing and dying cloth, looking after robes and bowls. You've seen how the monks practice with regard to robes, alms-round, dwelling place, medicines ... Now you must be willing to conduct yourselves in the same way. This is the foundation.

Now that you've learned the basics you can become a novice. I will give you a bowl, and tomorrow morning you will put on your robes neatly and walk for alms in the village ... Tomorrow, the villagers will put fresh cooked rice into your bowl, they will pay their respects to you. Why will these old people with grey hair hold their hands up in respect to you? Because of the power of the ochre robe. This ochre robe belongs to the Buddha. It has an incomparable power ... If you use it in the wrong way, you will degrade yourself.

There are a great number of Dhamma teachings to learn, but today, on the day of novice Ordination, there are just a few. Following the tradition handed down from the great teachers of old, today we study the five meditation objects: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin. When you first hear the list, it may sound a bit comical, but if you contemplate these five things well, it will become really profound. We are born with these things but we don't know them. It is necessary to learn these five fundamental meditation objects as the entrance to the path that leads directly to Nibbāna. Herein lies Right View. We are taught to learn these five basic meditation objects and then reflect on them.

Repeat after me in the scriptural language:

*Kesā, lomā, nakhā, dantā, taco.*

*Taco, dantā, nakhā, lomā, kesā.*

Some people say that everyone has these things; they know what they are already; why study them? But they don't really know what they are, they don't know the true nature of head hair, of

body hair, of nails, of teeth or of skin. Hair of the head is, in fact, repulsive. Where does it come from? It feeds on pus. The others are the same. These things are not glowing with health, you know. They're not delightful. But we don't really see that.

It's the flawed parts that people beautify, the unattractive parts; it's because of their great dirtiness that people pretty them up. Is there really anything beautiful about head hair? No, there isn't. Is it clean? There's nothing clean about it. If you heaped up a pile of hair and left it by the side of the road, would anyone pick it up? Take off your skin, put it by the side of the road, and then tomorrow on alms-round see if anyone has gone off with it yet ...

We don't see these things in their true light. Now that you are novices, pay attention to them. Head hair is not beautiful, body hair is not beautiful, nails are not beautiful, teeth are not beautiful, skin is not beautiful. But people cover them with powders and creams and so on to make them seem beautiful and so we're deluded and don't see the truth of things.

It's like the fish that swallows the hook; have you seen that? Actually, the fish doesn't intend to eat the hook, it's the bait that it swallows. If it saw the hook, the fish wouldn't eat the bait ... It swallows the bait because it doesn't know what it's doing. It's the same for all of us. If you were to see these things in their true light, you wouldn't want them. Why would you choose to burden yourself with things like that? But it's like the fish: once the hook is in its mouth, however much the fish wants to get it out, it can't. It's snagged ...

If you contemplate these five parts of the body over and over again and see them clearly, your mind will be at ease ... Keep contemplating. Don't be heedless ... Study these meditation objects and fear them like hooks. If you don't feel any fear towards them, it's because you don't know them.

Once you're ordained, then be obedient. Follow the teacher's advice and instruction. Be respectful, put yourself in awe of the Buddha and the training rules that he laid down ... You must try

your utmost to bring up a sense of fear and awe: a wise fear of wrongdoing and bad kamma, a fear of breaking the Buddha's laws. If you constantly reflect in this way, you will live peacefully, happy and heedful.

Now I will present you with your robe, this ochre dyed robe that is the victory banner of the *arahants*. Go outside and put on the lower and upper robes. Put them on beautifully, evenly all the way around.

## II. PARTS OF A WHOLE

### THE WAT PAH PONG SANGHA

The community at Wat Pah Pong consisted of monks, novices, postulants and *maechees*\* (white-robed nuns). The majority of the novices were teenage boys, ineligible from taking full monks' Ordination until the age of twenty. As for the monks, they could be divided into three groups: monks of regular standing, visiting monks and temporary monks.

The main body of the Sangha consisted of the first group: those monks who had arrived as laymen and had passed through the designated period of preparation before ordaining. This group might be further divided into: 'new' (*navaka*) monks – those having been in the Sangha for less than five years; 'middle' (*majjhima*) monks – those of between five and ten years standing; and 'senior' (*thera*) monks – those who had been in the Sangha for more than ten years.

The second, much smaller group consisted of monks ordained in other monasteries and classified as 'visiting' (*āgantuka*) monks. At any one time, this group would include both short-term visitors and monks wishing to join the Wat Pah Pong Sangha who were undergoing a period of probation and adaptation. The third group, usually only present during the Rains Retreat, consisted of monks who had taken temporary ordination.

\*The nuns lived separately from the male monastics; their training is dealt with in Chapter IX.

Luang Por made it clear that, in his view, the only legitimate reason for entering the Sangha in a forest monastery was to single-mindedly follow the path to enlightenment. He would caution the monks, ‘We’re not here to *become* anything at all.’ In other words, monastic life wasn’t about gaining any kind of reward, status or identity; that would simply perpetuate the suffering of the lay life in a new form. All craving, even for Nibbāna itself, was to be rooted out. Forbearance was singled out as a cardinal virtue. He said that people found ways to repress or conceal their faults in the world, whereas Dhamma practice opened the inner world up wide and exposed all faults. It was hard to endure.

Remember: the practice is to look at yourself. Don’t look outside – look within. Why? Because we are practising for enlightenment. Young men and old, we have renounced worldly work to come here to practice. The practice should result in the paths and fruits.\* If it doesn’t, then as far as I’m concerned, it’s a waste of time. Try to produce these results. Realize the paths and fruits. If it’s not a big path, then a small one; not a big fruit, then a small one. Do it. And don’t regress. Let the practice keep inching forward. Don’t be satisfied with what you’ve already achieved.

Luang Por said that if any monk practised diligently, the first level of enlightenment – stream-entry – was attainable within five years.\*\*

He would urge newly ordained monks to clearly understand that they were embarking on a life that ran counter to old, worldly habits:

Everyone likes to follow their desires, but once you’ve entered the Sangha here at Wat Pah Pong you can’t do that anymore. You’ve come here to train.

\*Pali: *maggaphala*. The ‘paths and fruits’ refers to the practice inclining towards, and the attainment of, the four stages of enlightenment. See Glossary: stream-enterer (p.821), once-returner (p.814), non-returner (p.814) and arahant (p.803).

\*\*cf. The Buddha’s statement in the *Satipatthāna* Sutta (MN 10): ‘Should any person maintain the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in this manner for seven years ... seven months ... seven days then by him, one of two fruitions is proper to be expected: arahantship here and now; or if some form of clinging is yet present, the state of non-returning.’

If you become a monk and think you're going to eat well, sleep well and lead a comfortable life, then you've got the wrong idea, you're in the wrong place. If that's what you want, you should remain as a layperson and support yourself.

It would not be easy for the faint-hearted. Only those who were fully committed would survive.

Those with faith can stand it. However demanding it is, they endure; whatever the difficulties and tribulations, they persist. Patient endurance is their guiding virtue. They don't just follow their desires.

A major challenge lay in avoiding the tendency to identify with the negative emotions stirred up by the training.

Because we're unable to distinguish between the mind and the defilements, we assume them to be one and the same thing. This undermines us. If we try to go against defilements, then it feels as if it's we ourselves who are being frustrated, and so we don't do it.

Becoming a monk is not an easy thing. It's tough. When outsiders talk about it, their words don't ring true to us. Take, for example, the common view that people become monks due to some disappointment in life. If someone like that arrives, you can tell it as soon as they walk through the gate. They're thinking that monastic life will be restful, but once they've entered the Sangha here, they find themselves under even more pressure than before, and eventually they can't take it anymore. That's how it is. I'm not just talking about other people: I suffered a lot myself. But I had a really ardent mind. I wouldn't let myself go on suffering. I suffered intensely – I don't know where the pain all came from – yet at the same time there was also a part of me that wouldn't go along with it. In fact, sometimes, thinking about the suffering and all the difficulties I was going through, I even quite enjoyed it.

Luang Por warned that if monks did not know how to take care of their faith, it could crumble. Unrealistic expectations were a great danger.

Many young monks disrobed when they realized just how much harder it was to train their mind than they had imagined.

So the real, the best foundation is to live with patience. Patience is essential. You have to go against your habits of mind and trust in the teachings and advice of the teacher.

In fact, the practice that led to the best possible outcome – the long-lasting welfare of self and others – was straightforward; it only seemed difficult because of defilement. Everything had been well set up to facilitate the training. All that needed to be done was to keep the Vinaya and monastic regulations, to follow the schedule, meditate diligently, and to deal wisely with whatever arose in the mind as a result. The point to be constantly borne in mind was that the goal of practice was to abandon craving.

This craving: people don't understand it, do they? Some people think that once they've gratified the craving, it will go away. It doesn't. Feeling sated and experiencing the cessation of craving are two different things altogether ... Give a hungry dog some rice. One plate, two plates of rice, go down in a flash. But by the time it's on its fourth plate, the dog's completely stuffed. So it lays down beside the unfinished plate and guards the rice, eyes flickering. If any other dogs come to eat the food, it threatens them, '*Grrr! Grrr!*' Dogs, humans – their instincts are pretty much the same.

The abandonment of craving, the cause of suffering, would not be accomplished by force.

Our capacity to abandon attachment to things depends on seeing how fitting it is to do that. When we are able to abandon something, it's because we've seen the suffering inherent in it. We're able to practise like this because we see the great value of doing so.

The Buddha taught us to have mindfulness, alertness and a constant all-round knowing of what's going on – and then to get down to it. After a period of sitting meditation is over, keep

reflecting on whatever you experience ... This will become a habit; it will form a condition and a power. Increasing wholesome habits is what the Buddha called progress. The development of meditation has to be like this.

Some people are disappointed by their results in meditation. They start thinking that they don't have the capacity to experience tranquillity, and so they disrobe. But it's not so easy to get what you desire. You can't force your mind to achieve a state of lucid calm. You have to be cool and unhurried. Persevere with the practice and the teachings. Put forth effort with both body and mind. Downfall in practice comes from not being willing or daring to do it, from not following the teachings, from a lack of faith.

Monks were to learn by putting forth effort and observing what happened as a result. It was not so important to be proficient in all the technical terms used to describe the process. Luang Por drew an analogy:

A layperson offers you a fruit, and you experience its sweet and delicious flavour even though you don't know its name ... Knowing its name wouldn't make it taste any better.

#### VISITING MONKS

More and more monks, ordained at other monasteries, arrived at Wat Pah Pong asking permission to join its Sangha either for a temporary period or for long-term training. Many of these monks were unfamiliar with life in a forest monastery, and few had received much instruction in the Vinaya. Although Luang Por was willing to take on monks ordained elsewhere, he was also aware of the challenges that integrating them into the community involved, especially the more senior amongst them. If visiting monks were allowed to take their place in the hierarchy according to seniority, then the Wat Pah Pong system – in which the more senior monks were expected to act as role models for the younger monks – would be compromised. Young monks and novices might start to lose their respect for seniors who were obviously unfamiliar with the training.

Luang Por's answer to this problem was to establish a number of protocols governing the admission of visiting monks: guests and would-be members into the Wat Pah Pong Sangha. Initially, monks arriving alone would only be permitted to stay overnight if they had been ordained for more than five years or if they had a covering letter from their preceptor. An initial stay of just three nights would be granted to visitors, although this could be extended at Luang Por's discretion. Monks coming from monasteries whose practice of the Vinaya was significantly different from Wat Pah Pong's would be designated as '*visiting monks*' and not considered fully fledged members of the community. They would sit separately in the dining hall, walk at the end of the line of monks on alms-round irrespective of their seniority and, most controversially, not be invited to formal meetings of the Sangha. Most of these practices reproduced the way that Dhammayut forest monasteries treated visiting monks from the Mahānikāya sect. However, as the monks being excluded at Wat Pah Pong were of the same sect, the policy led to strong criticism in some quarters. But Luang Por was unmoved by it. He himself had lived as a '*visiting monk*' for months at a time and found it helpful in removing pride and conceit.

The probationary period was not a comfortable time for the monks in question, but it fulfilled a number of useful functions. It provided them with an opportunity to give unhurried consideration to whether or not they wished to make a long-term commitment to the Wat Pah Pong Sangha. It allowed them to adapt to the way of practice at their own pace, without the pressure of being fully fledged members of the community. It also provided the opportunity for Luang Por to see whether or not these monks would fit in: he could observe their personalities, how the monks dealt with their loss of status, and how willing they were to take on a much more demanding standard of Vinaya practice. Furthermore, Luang Por was conscious that if monks who ordained elsewhere, with next to no period of preparation, could join the Wat Pah Pong Sangha too easily, then it would undermine the system of training that he had developed. More people would seek to bypass the initial training as postulant and novice by arriving at the monastery after having ordained elsewhere.

Ajahn Jun, who was to become one of Luang Por's closest and most trusted disciples, arrived at the beginning of July 1960, after spending a number

of years in a village monastery. The contrast was stark, and he felt jolted by a kind of culture shock. Being used to a more convivial atmosphere, he interpreted the reserve of Wat Pah Pong monks as coldness and arrogance. This was apparently confirmed on his first full day when clearing the site for a new kuti: none of the monks seemed interested in helping with the work.

“Me, I didn’t know about the Vinaya rule forbidding monks from digging the earth and I just got stuck in. I dug holes, put in the posts and cut down vines to bind things up.”

It was by no means the only Vinaya rule of which he was ignorant. He had come to the monastery with a few spare sets of robes and a stock of tinned milk and Ovaltine. He soon discovered that at Wat Pah Pong, the rule forbidding more than one set of the three robes was strictly observed, and that milk and Ovaltine were considered to be foodstuffs and could only be consumed at the meal time. There was so much he didn’t know – it was a steep learning curve.

“When he’d tested my faith and respect and he saw that I had confidence in him, he began to teach me ... Luang Por said I had to throw away any spells, mantric formulas or empowered medallions I might have collected. He would teach me afresh. Right or wrong, I should just follow him for the time being and then discuss it later ... I’d been ordained for six years, and I’d never meditated. The things I’d been doing before – the building work, bricklaying, carpentry, cement work – he had me put aside altogether. He taught me how to practise sitting and walking meditation. He taught me how to rest the breath, establish mindfulness. I was utterly determined to do well, and I did everything he told me.”

Just prior to the beginning of the annual Rains Retreat, Luang Por told Ajahn Jun that he was ready to be accepted into the Sangha. First, however, most of his belongings would need to be replaced. Monks commit offences against the Vinaya both in accepting money and spending it. Any item purchased by a monk is considered ‘impure’ and liable to forfeiture. Most of Ajahn Jun’s possessions fell into this category.

“Luang Por told Ajahn Tiang to go through my requisites and see what was unallowable, so that my *sīla* could be purified in the midst of the

Sangha. It turned out that by the end of the inspection, all I had left was one thin lower robe. Everything else I'd bought myself and was in breach of the *Nissaggiya Pācittiya* training rules. The inspection was very thorough. Even though some of the items had been properly offered by laypeople, they were declared impure – incorrect by the Vinaya – because I'd bought the detergent that I washed them in. He had me send everything I relinquished back to my old monastery.

“Ajahn Tiang gave me a new set of robes. They were dark-coloured meditation monk’s robes, patched in a number of places. Luang Por said, ‘Don’t worry about requisites: if your *sīla* is pure, they will appear by themselves.’ After that, he made an announcement to the Sangha and then had me formally determine\* the cloth, put the robes on and confess my offences. I didn’t know how to confess offences in the forest Sangha way and had to repeat the words after him. After the Sangha had accepted me, Luang Por gave a talk ... He talked about various kinds of virtue, and the dirt and impurity that the Sangha had kindly cleansed me of. He said that I mustn’t forget that debt of gratitude, that I must remember it for all of my life. I cried.”

Ajahn Maha Amorn remembers the day he changed his requisites:

“It was my watch that I regretted parting from. It was a really good one, and I’d always used it to keep an eye on the time while I was teaching. As I picked it up in order to formally relinquish it, the thought arose in my mind, ‘If I give this watch up and I end up going back to teaching, where will I ever get another one like it?’ At that moment, Luang Por spoke up as if he knew what was in my mind, ‘Oh, you’ve got a watch? Throw it away. It’s not a good thing. Take mine.’ Then he took a travelling alarm clock out of his shoulder bag and gave it to me. That clock is still around. I’ve kept it with me ever since.”

Ajahn Boonchu was one of many of the stalwarts of Wat Pah Pong in later years, who began their lives as visiting monks.

“When the monks and novices performed the daily chores, or there was a work project, it made me very observant. I helped out ... I allowed my

\*See page 246, ‘Robes’

pride to motivate me, ‘Whatever they can do, however hard it is, so can I.’ Luang Por watched us a lot, very carefully. When I first arrived, I felt in great awe of him – really, it was intimidation. In fact, I felt intimidated by everything: from all the rules and observances to the young novices, and even the laypeople, because many of them had been practicing longer than me and probably, I thought, knew more than I did. Although I already had six rains, it seemed as if I hadn’t even started to practise.

“Whatever I did was a mixture of the correct and incorrect, and sometimes I’d embarrass myself, but Luang Por would just let it go. After I’d been there some time, after the evening session in the Dhamma Hall was over, I had the opportunity to go together with some other visiting monks and novices to pay our respects to him and receive teachings ... If anyone had a problem in their practice, that was the time when you could ask him. Sometimes he himself would ask, ‘How is so-and-so?’ and ‘What about so-and-so? Is everything going well?’ He’d ask us about how we were getting on, did we feel hungry in the evenings eating only one meal a day? Could we endure it? Sometimes he would give an exhortation: ‘Be very patient. Just keep practicing. You’re living with friends. Any task that needs to be done, or any observance that is still faulty or lax, then observe your friends. Practise well, don’t be heedless.’”

#### LUANG TA

It is common in Thailand for middle-aged and even elderly men to join the Sangha. Some decide to enter a monastery after retirement, some after their children have grown up and left home, some following divorce and others (provided they have gained the consent of their wife) while still married. The traditional term for a man who becomes a monk after having lived the householder’s life is ‘*Luang Ta*’. Luang Tas have had a poor reputation since the time of the Buddha. The archetypal Luang Ta wears his robe untidily, is still stuck in his worldly ways, and is stubborn and difficult to teach. He finds it difficult to deal with the change of status he experiences as a junior member of a community in which some of the monks he must defer to are no older than his children.

There is a whole genre of humorous Luang Ta stories, mostly revolving around the theme of greed or old worldly habits asserting themselves. In

one typical story, a Luang Ta on alms-round comes to a fork in the road. To the left lies a village where he often receives delicious curries but few sweets; to the right lies a village where he receives wonderful sweets but few curries. After an agonized period of indecision, he sets off down the curry village road, but soon, swept up by a vision of sweets, changes his mind, retraces his steps and takes the road to the sweets village. But as soon as he is well upon sweets village road, he starts to regret forgoing the curries at curry village. He walks back and forth so many times – caught between his conflicting desires – that eventually he realizes that the alms-round time has long past and that today he will get nothing to eat at all.

Monks resembling the Luang Ta caricature have always been easy enough to find in the village temples of rural Isan; however, this has not been the case in the forest monasteries. It takes a lot of courage for an elderly man to commit himself to the ascetic life of a forest monk. And of those who were determined to do so, only the ones who could prove themselves capable of enduring the rigours of the life and willing to live by the Vinaya and monastic regulations, were accepted into the Sangha at Wat Pah Pong. For this reason, the quality of the elderly Luang Tas at the monastery was high. Amongst their number were to be found some of the most loved and respected members of the Sangha.

As a means of gauging their suitability, Luang Por required elderly men to spend long periods of time, first as a postulant and then as a novice, before becoming a monk. During this probationary period (and some elderly men never went beyond novice status), Luang Por would comfort them when things got tough, giving them inspiration and encouraging them not to be depressed by the frailty of their bodies. One elderly novice, sad that he would not be able to become a monk, was uplifted by Luang Por's words to him:

"He said that I had to take responsibility for my practice but not to push my body too far. It was like an old oxcart, he said, falling apart a little bit more every day, and not to worry about it too much. He said that ordaining as a monk is a convention. You don't become a true monk by going through an Ordination ceremony, but through practice. He said that laypeople and novices could become true monks if they practised well.

“He told me stories from the time of the Buddha about laypeople who attained stream-entry, and about one who realized arahantship and then got gored to death by a bull while he was still searching for some yellow cloth to make a robe. I felt very proud when Luang Por told me these things. And he was kind enough to tell me one anecdote that was really inspiring. It concerned a certain monk of high ecclesiastical rank. He was a Pali scholar of the highest level and the head monk of a province, but he had so many responsibilities that he disrobed and re-ordained as a novice. In the hot season, he would disappear into the mountains to meditate, and then just before the Rains Retreat he would return to the monastery and stay with his disciples, giving Dhamma talks and teaching ... Luang Por said to me, ‘You can do that as well. Practise sincerely, at the optimum level for your strength and age. Don’t look at others. Don’t be a fault-finder. It doesn’t matter what others do. You’re an old man now, don’t take any interest in the faults of others.’ I took Luang Por’s teachings to heart.”

#### TEMPORARY MONKS

Although there are approximately 300,000 monks and novices in robes at any one time, probably less than one in ten of those who enter the monastic order in Thailand remain in it for the rest of their lives. Temporary ordination is the norm rather than the exception – traditionally, for the three months of the Rains Retreat but often for a much shorter period in these busy days. It is a custom that has done much to enrich Thai society over the past millennia, creating deep and lasting links between lay Buddhists and the monastic order. Temporary ordination has prevented the Sangha from being seen as an elite caste and has ensured that few households lack a family member who is, or who has at one time been, a member. The value of the custom to the well-being of society is recognized in the allowance for those employed by the state (including members of the armed forces) to take full-paid leave to become a monk for one three-month Rains Retreat period during their career.

Temporary ordination provides a rite of passage in which young men gain the opportunity to study the Buddha’s teachings intensively and to learn how to apply them in their daily life before embarking upon a career and

marriage. In former times, a young man who had yet to spend time as a monk would be considered ‘unripe’ or immature and find it difficult to make a good marriage.

Perhaps the majority of young men who become temporary monks are motivated, not so much by concern for their own spiritual welfare, as by the belief that it is the right thing for a Buddhist to do at that stage in their life, that they are upholding a long-held family custom, and most importantly, that they are making their parents happy and proud. The belief that taking temporary ordination is the supreme means of expressing the gratitude a son feels towards his parents is deeply embedded in Thai culture. Parents are believed to make much merit if a son becomes a monk.

For some monasteries, a steady or seasonal influx of temporary monks can be like a regular infusion of new blood that prevents stagnation. At the same time, it may also disrupt the harmony of an established community. Teaching and training new monks can be a heavy burden, and the influence of even a small number of young monks who have no real interest in learning, but who are merely seeing out time ‘for the sake of their parents’, can have an adverse effect on the whole monastery.

The difficulty in balancing support for a worthy custom, and the need to protect the standards of the resident community, were reflected in Luang Por’s shifting policy regarding the acceptance of temporary monks at Wat Pah Pong. Some years, the Rains Retreat would see as many as a dozen, other years almost none. Generally speaking, if one year’s intake had been disruptive, he would accept significantly fewer the following year.

At Wat Pah Pong, the majority of temporary monks were government employees in their middle years, rather than young men. Of these, the most popular with the resident Sangha tended to be members of the armed forces. They were used to discipline and physical austerity, tended to be highly motivated and fit in well. Problems tended to occur with the civil servants from a more cosseted background. For them, every day in the forest could be a struggle, and for some, the last day of the retreat seemed like the finishing line after a gruelling marathon run. On the other end of the spectrum were the temporary monks who extended their stay

in robes for a few more months or even years beyond their original plan. A few found what they were looking for at Wat Pah Pong and never returned to lay life.

## NIKĀYA

Most of Luang Pu Mun's great disciples began their monastic life in the larger Mahānikāya Order, and changed their affiliation to the more rigorous Dhammayut Order to which he belonged, after becoming his students. Luang Por was one of a small group of monks – its unofficial leader being Luang Pu Tongrat – who acknowledged the generally lax standards of conduct within the Mahānikāya Order, but decided to try to reform it from within, rather than reject it altogether.

Luang Pu Mun established a number of protocols regarding the reception of visiting Mahānikāya monks (considered to be lacking in purity with regards to the Vinaya) in his monasteries. They were to be seated separately, for example, and most importantly, were barred from attending formal meetings of the Sangha such as the fortnightly recitation of the *Pātimokkha*.

The abbots of Dhammayut forest monasteries conceded that the Vinaya practiced at Wat Pah Pong was of a high standard, but they felt that it would be disrespectful to the deceased Luang Pu Mun to make an exception to his instructions on their own authority. Thus, in most cases, visiting monks from Wat Pah Pong encountered the same restrictions as those who did not take the Vinaya so seriously. Despite being treated with great politeness and being reassured that it was merely a matter of convention, this could rankle.

One year, Luang Por gave a certain Dhammayut monk permission to spend the Rains Retreat at Wat Pah Pong.\* At a meeting of the Sangha, he asked the community whether they thought the monk should be allowed to attend the *Pātimokkha* recitation. He silently allowed the tit-for-tat position to emerge. ‘They don’t allow us to attend their formal gatherings, why should we allow them to attend ours?’ was the most common

\*Dhammayut forest monks from a recognized monastery took their place in the Sangha hierarchy immediately.

response. Having listened to all of his disciples' opinions, Luang Por gave them his own thoughts, so providing a precedent for all future occasions:

We could do that [we could exclude him], but it would not be Dhamma or Vinaya, it would be acting from opinion, personality view and pride. It wouldn't feel right. Why don't we take the Buddha as our example? We won't hold to this order or that, but to the Dhamma-Vinaya. If a monk practises well and keeps the Vinaya, then we let him attend formal meetings, whether he be Dhammayut or Mahānikāya. If he's not a good monk, has no sense of wise shame, then whichever order he belongs to, we don't allow him to attend. If we practise like this, then we will be conforming to the Buddha's injunctions.

## DISROBING

The majority of those who entered the monkhood at Wat Pah Pong did so without any intention of disrobing at some point in the future, but without completely discounting the possibility; they made a determination to give themselves to the training, and to find out whether they did, indeed, have what it took to stay long-term. Even amongst those who felt no interest in pursuing a life of family and career, few were willing to offer a hostage to fortune by declaring a lifetime commitment. To most it seemed arrogant and unwise; who knew what the future held?

The Vinaya does not stipulate that candidates for Ordination take lifetime vows. If monks become unhappy and wish to return to lay life, then they are free to do so at any time, without stigma and without the psychological bar of a long, forbidding disrobing ceremony.

Leaving the Sangha could not be more straightforward. Disrobing is accomplished when a monk informs any person who understands the meaning of his words that he is abandoning his monkhood. From that moment onwards, even while still wearing the robes, he is, technically speaking, a layman.

In practice, a short ceremony is performed. The monk formally requests forgiveness from his teacher, for any offence or difficulty he might have caused him, before informing him, using a short Pali phrase, of his

decision to leave the Sangha. With these few words, he becomes a layman. Having changed into lay clothes, he requests the Five Precepts and some words of advice for his return to the world.

A key reason why disrobing is made so easy, both practically and psychologically, is the recognition that few people have the vocation to stay in robes for their whole life, and that it is better for someone who wishes to leave to do so, rather than live on in the monastery in a half-hearted and discontented way. Miserable monks tend to make those around them miserable, and their lack of commitment to the training easily leads to disharmony and decline in standards of the Vinaya.

Few monks avoid periods of doubt entirely. Consequently, understanding the nature of doubt and learning how to deal with it wisely is one of the most important skills that a monk can master. Until that skill is developed – and it may take many years – the teacher is there to offer reflections and encouragement. If he sees a monk's discontent as a superficial wobble rather than a genuine inability or unwillingness to live the monks' life any longer, he will try to help the monk find a renewed sense of purpose. The teacher will be aware of many monks who left the Sangha in haste only to repent at leisure.

In the early years at Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por put considerable effort into dissuading restless monks from disrobing. As he got older, he was less inclined to do so – a pattern common, almost to cliché, amongst leaders of monastic communities. Helping monks to emerge from a period of dissatisfaction with monastic life was hard work, and more often than not, resulted in a postponement rather than a complete ending of their desire to disrobe. As teachers matured, they tended to become more stoic about the loss of promising young monks and saw the need to be more discriminating as to how they spent their time and energy.

Some monks disrobed in order to take care of an ageing parent; some left due to chronic illness. But probably the most common cause for disrobing was the strong pull of the sensual world. Many monks found that celibacy could be managed without any great stress, and more than a few found it easy; but when lust did take hold in a monk's mind, it could be of

an ogreish intensity. To those who were struggling with lustful feelings, Ajahn Jun remembered how direct Luang Por's words could be:

"Luang Por would say, 'Really think about it ... [women] have got nine holes in their body just like you do, and every one of them is filled with a different kind of waste. There's nothing beautiful or good or clean in any one of those holes. You sit there and you walk about daydreaming, imagining all kinds of pleasant things, but they're not true. You'll lose your freedom. You'll be under a woman's thumb. You'll lead a life of frustrations and strife. You're being seduced by sexual desire. Don't believe it. Don't disrobe just because lust tells you to. You won't die if you don't follow it. Believe me: lust has been deceiving you for countless lifetimes.'"

He also recalled how on alms-round, Luang Por would point out the sufferings of lay life to monks assailed by lust. The sound of a husband and wife shouting at each other, the sight of a tired-looking woman trying desperately to console a screaming child, or of a woman – prematurely aged by a hard life – trudging off to the fields: any such figure might be indicated with the words, 'Is that really what you want?'

When monks first ordained, they could be so inspired that the very idea of someday disrobing seemed unthinkable. But, as time went on, their initial faith-driven perceptions, so apparently rock solid, could waver. If monks lacked the resources of patience and endurance needed to bear with the difficult periods when their inspiration ran dry, it was staying in robes that might suddenly come to seem unthinkable.

When a monk started to doubt his capacity to realize the Dhamma in his present lifetime, he could come to feel caught between two stools: the pleasures of the lay life being behind him and yet no clear path to the profound happiness of inner liberation visible before him. The thought of reaching the end of his life in that unresolved state could come to seem intolerable. It was the classic monastic version of the male midlife crisis. Some monks faced no particular moment of truth, but it was as if their sense of vocation just gradually faded like a flashlight battery, until there was no light left to see their way by, at which point they left.

Disrobing was seen by almost all as an admission of defeat.\* To some, return to the world after putting their best effort into the monk's life, seemed like accepting an honourable discharge from the army after an ultimately unsuccessful campaign. Most were humble. They would say that they had not amassed enough good kamma to enable them to stay in the Sangha any longer; their store of merit had allowed them only this much time in the robes. Now they wanted to return to a less intense level of commitment to the Buddha *Sāsana*: to lead a good life as a householder, support the Sangha and work to accumulate more good kamma.

#### 'LIKE RAIN ABOUT TO FALL ...'

Ordinations and disrobings of junior monks are such a normal part of monastic life in Thailand, even in forest monasteries, that they occasion little remark; however, when a senior monk decides to leave the Sangha, considerable shock waves pass through the monastery, particularly amongst monks who are themselves caught in a web of doubt. So it was when the abbot of one of the branch monasteries (and one of Luang Por's senior disciples to boot) arrived one day – strained, pale-faced – with the unenviable task of announcing that he had fallen in love with a lay supporter and wanted to disrobe and get married.

To Luang Por, a monk intending to abandon monastic training because of romantic infatuation was about to take a foolish step backwards and downwards. He considered lust as merely the immature expression of a noble emotion, something that should be 'flipped over' into *mettā*, loving-kindness.

You've got to flip this personal love of yours over into a general love, a love for all sentient beings, like the love of a mother or father for their child ... You have to wash the sensuality out of your affection, like someone wanting to eat wild yams has to soak their heads first to wash out the poison. Worldly love is the same: you have to reflect on it, look at it until you see the suffering bound up in it and then gradually wash away the germ

\*The Western monks who disrobed tended to be more upbeat. Many opted to see it as, for example, the ending of a chapter in their spiritual life, a time to move on to new challenges.

of intoxication. That leaves you with a pure love, like that of a teacher for his disciples ... If you can't wash the sensuality out of love, then it will still be there – still bossing you around – when you're an old man.

Sexual desire was to be clearly understood – not repressed, but investigated. Luang Por suggested, as teachers have generally done in this situation, a temporary change of surroundings. He made an appeal to the monk's pride:

Reflect on the suffering of sexual desire until you can let it go. If you can't solve the problem with wisdom, or at least reduce its strength, then leave your monastery for a while. After you've re-established your practice, then return. When you fall down, you have to know how to pick yourself up again. You have to know how to struggle and crawl. When you've been knocked over, don't just lie there helplessly and give up.

But once the idea of disrobing has become real to a monk, it gains an almost irresistible momentum. A sense of inevitability – which, following an excruciating period of indecision, often feels like a blessed relief – undermines the monk's willingness to question his decision. It was this sense, that there was no longer a way back, that Luang Por sought to counter:

According to the old saying, there are five unstoppable things: rain about to fall, excrement about to leave the body, a person about to die, a child about to be born, and a monk about to disrobe. The first four are true, I'm sure, but not the last one. I'm confident that a monk can be stopped from disrobing. I myself once considered disrobing, and I changed my mind.

In trying to puncture the unrealistic visions of the future that the monk had created, Luang Por could paint a vivid picture. Whereas the monk's life was untrammelled, he said, with the opportunity to go walking care-free through the forests and mountains on tudong, the householder's life was cramped and constricted:

Having a family imprisons you ... You end up with the baby crying, your wife grumbling, your father-in-law scolding you, your mother-in-law hating you, hemmed in by pots and pans. Think about it.

He reminded the monk of the difficulties of making a way in the world, of how so many years of living by a high moral standard made surviving in a duplicitous world awkward and painful. He called to mind monks who had left and, once the novelty had worn off, bitterly regretted their decision to disrobe. He described the pleasures of sensuality as superficial and fleeting – like the taste of good food on the tongue – in no way comparable to the profound and lasting well-being that could be realized through Dhamma practice:

If you keep meditating until your mind becomes calm and lucid, and you see the Dhamma, then you will truly be at ease. Sometimes you can be so full of bliss that you don't need to eat at all. And it's a profound ease, not just a pleasant sensation on the surface of your tongue.

The fundamental message Luang Por sought to convey was that lust and longing were not things outside the monastic training pulling the monk inexorably away from it. On the contrary, dealing with such emotional crises was an integral part of the training. Looking at the suffering, letting go of the desires that fed it, freeing oneself from the suffering through the practice of the Eightfold Path – this was the very heart of monastic life.

Whatever kind of suffering arises, then contemplate it. Look at it until you see it clearly. Sometimes, when it's not clear, you have to fast and go without sleep and fight with it, be willing to die. Ven. Ajahn Tongrat once considered disrobing. He wouldn't listen to anybody who tried to dissuade him, his mind was made up. But then one day he asked for an axe from the villagers and started chopping logs. He chopped for three days and three nights until he was exhausted and his hands were covered in blisters. Then he shouted out loud, 'Now do you know who's master?' He was talking to his defilements.

Great masters have been through this. One of Luang Pu Mun's disciples fell in love with a woman who regularly put food in his bowl on alms-round. His friends took him off to meditate and shut him up in the Uposatha Hall. He fasted for five or six days, and then his mind flipped upright. He saw the unattractiveness of the body, his mind became calm and lucid, he saw the Dhamma – and he survived.

Sexual desire is your weak point, and you have to remedy it with meditation on the unattractive parts of the body. Keep testing your strength until you know how much you can take. Don't let the defilements keep punching you on your weak spot until they knock you out. Develop more skill in meditation. If the defilements come high, then duck underneath them. If you're not strong enough to take them on, then when they come at you low, jump over them and run away for a while.

The decision to disrobe may not be completely irrevocable. Nevertheless, once a monk has made up his mind to disrobe, even the rhetorical skills and charisma of a master like Luang Por Chah rarely succeed in changing his mind. He feels a momentum. It's as if he's travelling downhill without brakes and is being encouraged to turn around and climb back up the mountain. In this particular case, after a short period of reflection undertaken out of deference to his teacher, the monk disrobed. Little was heard of him after that. Perhaps he lived happily ever after; perhaps he did not.

## SAMANA

*'Samaṇas. Samaṇas.' – that is how people perceive you. And when asked, 'What are you?' you claim that, 'We are samaṇas.' So with this being your designation and this your claim [you should think]: 'We will practice the way of the samaṇa with integrity so that our designations will be true and our claims accurate; so that the services of those whose robes, alms-food, lodging and medicinal requisites we use will bring them great fruit and benefit, and so that our Going Forth will not be barren, but fruitful and fertile.' Thus, monks, should you train yourselves.*

MN 40

The word ‘*samāṇa*’, usually translated as ‘recluse’ or ‘contemplative’, is generally taken to be derived from a word meaning ‘ascetic striving’. Luang Por preferred to render it as ‘one whose mind is at peace’. At the time of the Buddha, it was the name given to members of the various religious sects who had abandoned their caste identity and the life of the householder. In the Buddhist tradition, ‘*samāṇa*’ has been used as a synonym for both ‘monk’ and ‘true monk’. In the sutta passage above, the Buddha refers to its first meaning as a conventional designation and urges monks to constantly bear in mind their responsibilities to act in conformity with it. As ‘true monk’, the term ‘*samāṇa*’ encompasses all the qualities that monks should aspire to.

Luang Por encouraged monks to dwell upon and consciously cultivate the perception of themselves as monks or *samāṇas*, by constantly reminding themselves of their role and responsibilities and the goals of their monastic life. By doing so, he wanted them to cultivate a new identity (as a skilful means, not an ultimate truth) that would distance them from their former identities in the world and serve to strengthen the mental factors of wise shame and fear of consequences. This perception was to give them a wholesome sense of pride in their lineage and of being upholders of an ancient tradition. It was meant to inspire them with the guiding ideals of Sangha life.

A *samāṇa*’s life was characterized by the sincere effort to study and practice the threefold training of *sīla*, *saṃādhi* and *paññā*, in order to realize liberation and to inspire others by their conduct.

Firstly, resolve to have victory over yourself. That’s the main thing. You don’t need victory over anything or anyone else. If you’re always thinking of defeating other people, you’re losing the battle of practice. True practice is based upon reaching the point where you know how to achieve a constant victory over yourself. Ultimately, if you achieve victory over yourself, then you achieve victory over all things. Establish this principle constantly in your mind.

In a memoir, Ajahn Khemadhammo summarized:

“And the purpose of our life we were never allowed to forget: we are monks, not for gain and fame, not for status and worldly advancement, but in order that we may have the best possible chance of facing our defilements – all those spoiling influences in our hearts and minds – seeing and understanding them and casting them out to achieve a secure and lasting peace, the real happiness of Nibbāna.”

In one discourse, Luang Por challenged the monks:

What do you want? Wealth and respect? Rank and honours? Material things? We’re monastics. The Buddha taught us not to aim at such things. If you’re intent on pleasure, on fun, on an easy life and good food, on material things, then it would be better if you hadn’t become a monk at all. It means you’re lying and deceiving the laypeople ... If you want all that, then go out and make a living as a layperson. There’s no point in coming to live here in the forest, going without sleep and eating only once a day.

Reflect on this deeply. Ask yourself the question, ‘What did I come here for? What am I doing here?’ You’ve shaved off your hair, put on the ochre robe. What for? Go ahead, ask yourself. Do you think it’s just to eat and sleep and live a heedless life? If that’s what you want, you can do that in the world. Take the oxen and buffalo out to the fields, come back home, eat and sleep – anyone can do that. If you come and act in that neglectful, indulgent way in the monastery, then you’re not worthy of the name of monks and novices.

Life as a monk offered great opportunities for cultivation of the path. But without the willingness to overcome old habits, it was easy to founder.

If you accept the basic principles and try to follow them, you’ll have a practice. But if you don’t accept them and just follow your likes and dislikes, you’ll be heading for disaster. Even if you live as a monk for twenty or thirty years, you still won’t know the flavour of the Buddha’s teachings. You’ll be like the fisherman who goes every day to fish in a pond without any fish in it. However diligent

such a fisherman may be, he is always disappointed. Day after day, he casts his net and brings in nothing.

Recollection of the great masters could bring the mind back onto the right track when it wandered. Their attainments could be emulated through the power of wise effort.

Read the biographies of the great teachers. They're singular people, aren't they? They're different. Think carefully about that difference. Train your mind in the correct way. You don't have to depend on anyone else; discover your own skilful means to train your mind.

If the more skilful means were unable to stem the flow of deluding thought, then a more direct approach was needed – whatever did the job. Once the immediate danger had been averted, a more nuanced approach could be returned to.

If the mind starts thinking of worldly things, then quickly subdue it. Stop it. Get up. Change your posture. Tell yourself not to think about such things – there are better things to think about. It's essential that you don't just mildly yield to those thoughts. Once they've gone from your mind, then you'll feel better. Don't imagine that you can take it easy and your practice will take care of itself. Everything depends on training.

### III. THE MARVEL OF INSTRUCTION

#### MODES OF TEACHING

The body of Luang Por Chah's teachings is generally considered to consist of the material recorded on reel-to-reel tapes and audio cassettes and then transcribed and printed in books, originally in Thai and subsequently translated into many other languages. But for his monastic disciples, the formal discourses captured by those audio recordings and reproduced in books were only one part, and perhaps not the most important part, of what they received from him.

Luang Por's most powerful teaching for those who lived with him was, arguably, not what he said or even what he did, but who he was, and who he was perceived to be. His disciples saw him as the living, visible proof that there was truly an end to suffering, and that it could be achieved through practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. Seeing him, sensing him nearby, gave them the strength of mind to endure the difficulties of the training. In the beginning, it was often faith in the teacher himself, rather than in specific, profound teachings he imparted, that kept young monks in the robes.

Charisma is not an inevitable fruit of liberation. Some fully enlightened beings prefer a life of obscurity and project a quiet and unobtrusive air that makes them almost invisible. Luang Por was not such a figure. He was, in all meanings of the word, an impressive monk: his presence impressed itself effortlessly upon those around him. One Western monk said of him, 'If any human being deserves to be called 'a force of nature', it's Luang Por.'

The Buddha referred to the teacher as the '*kalyāṇamitta*' or good friend. He was not a guru to be worshipped but a wise and compassionate guide on the path. He inspired strong confidence through his impeccable practice of the Vinaya and the monastic observances. He practised what he preached and did not ask his disciples to do anything that he would not do himself. He taught monks to spend every spare moment on the walking meditation path, and he would often be seen pacing up and down on his own path. The sense of solidity and unwavering purpose in the way he lived his life transmitted itself to his disciples.

The feelings of faith, love and devotion, respect and reverence that Luang Por inspired in those around him provided the emotional context in which his oral teachings were received and played an important part in the effect they produced. Teaching ability is as little an inevitable outcome of liberation as charisma. Inarticulate unenlightened monks usually become inarticulate enlightened monks. Luang Por, however, had always been a fine and fluent speaker. As *kalyāṇamitta* to a large group of monks and lay supporters his ability to transmit the teachings in a clear and rousing manner, appropriate to his audience, became renowned.

Ajahn Jun, a fine Dhamma teacher in his own right, found the talks so gripping he could enthuse about them half a lifetime after his first exposure:

“Luang Por gave talks almost every day. If someone had misbehaved, then the talk might go on for hours. His voice was loud, resonant, very powerful; you felt how determined he was that his listeners should understand. It was as if he wanted his words to wear down his disciples’ defilements until they were as smooth as a drum-skin. His talks were on many different levels: he would talk in one way to the Sangha when there were no laypeople present, another way when there were, and another way if he was addressing the laypeople directly. He would tell us off but not angrily. He never ran out of words. The talks were incredibly forthright and bold. He wasn’t afraid of anyone. Listening to him talk you were never bored – you were enthralled. And what he said hit home so well that, even to this day, his words are still ringing in my ears.”

As monks walked out of the Dhamma Hall after one of Luang Por’s talks, it was rare not to hear voices exclaiming that parts of the talk were specifically aimed at them, how marvellous it was that Luang Por should have chosen to speak on the very subject that was currently obsessing them. Monks would speak of labouring for some time over a doubt and then how the talk addressed that problem directly and in detail, putting their mind to rest. Ajahn Anek said:

“His words pierced to your heart. Most people’s doubts about meditation would be answered during his formal talks; he would deal with exactly the problem that was frustrating you, no matter how subtle it might be. If you listened closely to every word he said, you’d find it exactly right for you. That was his genius. It was truly profound.”

In some cases – perhaps the majority of them – the belief monks held that Luang Por was talking to them personally may be put down to the flowing, unstructured nature of his discourses. The number of defilements is finite, and in a long talk it is unlikely that any one of the major ones will go unmentioned, at least in passing. Indeed, Luang Por sometimes referred to ‘casting his net’ with more general observations about mental defilements that hauled in all those who were affected by them. However, there

were also occasions where monks were particularly moved by passages in talks that took an unexpected deviation from the flow of his discourse. Beyond dispute was the way in which the formal Dhamma talks set the tone in the monastery. In the days following a particularly inspiring talk, there would be a tangible buoyancy in the air; in the days after an admonitory exhortation, even the colours of the forest could seem subdued.

Luang Por would spend time every day – longer as he got older and less active – sitting on a wide wicker seat underneath his kuti, making himself available for anyone who wished to speak to him. During the day, most of Luang Por’s conversations were with lay visitors, but monks and novices acting as attendants would enjoy the opportunity to listen to him answer his guests’ questions and offer reflections. Monks with free time would often sit down in a corner and listen. Sometimes Luang Por would shoo them away, ‘No need to sit around here. Go away and meditate.’ At other times, he would permit them to stay. In the evenings after the group chanting and meditation had ended, a number of monks would gravitate to Luang Por’s kuti in order to listen and learn, and sometimes, just to sit quietly with their eyes closed in meditation.

On one occasion, a Western monk was sitting listening to Luang Por answering questions with short succinct answers, concise but profound, and after the guests had left he exclaimed, ‘Luang Por, that was just like Zen!’ And Luang Por replied:

No, it wasn’t. It was just like me.

Not all of Luang Por’s teachings have been preserved. Occasionally, he would speak privately with monks whose meditation practice had reached an advanced level. The advice given during those conversations has never been revealed. It is worth bearing in mind that the Dhamma talks that have been recorded and transcribed, for all their richness, are restricted to Luang Por’s public teachings.

Although Luang Por was always available to disciples struggling with doubts about practice, he did not necessarily answer the questions he received, or if he did, not in the way that they expected. He was not interested in spoon-feeding the Dhamma. Sometimes, sensing that no

answer he might give would serve any useful purpose, that it would simply increase the questioner's confusion or conceit, he would refuse to answer at all. This was not always to the questioner's liking. Luang Por would shrug:

If they had even a glimmering of understanding, they wouldn't ask such questions in the first place.

He continued:

The more you explain, the more doubts you'll create in their minds because they haven't practised to a point where they can understand. If they practise, then they'll know for themselves and be free from doubts.

Inexperienced meditators were like small children who did not, as yet, understand the world around them:

When the child sees a chicken he asks, 'Dad! Dad! What's that?' When he sees a duck it's, 'Dad! Dad! What's that?' Then he sees a pig and again it's, 'Dad! Dad! What's that?' Eventually, the father can't be bothered to answer. There's no end to the questions, because to the child, everything is new. In the end, the father just replies, 'Mmm, Mmm.' If he were to answer every single question, he'd die of exhaustion. The child isn't tired at all; it never stops asking. Eventually, the problem disappears by itself as the child gets older and more experienced. In the same way, if you are devoted to reflection and persevere until you comprehend the way things are, then problems will gradually clear up by themselves.

Luang Por praised disciples who treated their problems as challenges to be overcome. He wanted monks to learn how to develop their own skilful means to deal with difficulties, rather than allowing themselves to become overly dependent on him. Most doubts about meditation practice were resolved through becoming aware of the nature of doubt itself, seeing it as a conditioned phenomenon and not identifying with it. This was one reason why he was not in favour of the daily interviews popular in meditation centres: they took too much responsibility away from the

meditator and deprived them of opportunities to grow in wisdom. The Thai term for such interviews between meditation teacher and student is ‘*sop arom*’, literally ‘mood-inspection’, and Luang Por once joked:

Even dogs know their own moods; when they feel hungry, they howl.

His advice was to keep putting as much effort as possible into formal meditation:

In the body of practices that make up monastic training, sitting and walking meditation constitute the backbone ... Those whose practice is going to be strong are the ones who don't neglect their walking meditation, who don't neglect their sitting meditation, who don't let slip their sense-restraint.

Each monk had a walking meditation path, some twenty to thirty paces long by the side of his kuti. As soon as the daily meal and clean-up was completed, the monks were encouraged to return immediately to their huts, put their robes out on a line to air, and begin to practise walking meditation. For those who did that regularly:

Their walking path is worn into a furrow. I've seen it myself many times. Monks like that don't feel jaded or stale in their meditation. They have energy; they have real power. If you all give that kind of attention to your practice, it will go well.

The training that Luang Por provided his monks was a well-rounded one. Monks learned how to meditate and were encouraged to meditate a lot. But they also learned the Vinaya in great detail. They also learned how to give the precepts to the laypeople, how to chant blessings and how to conduct funeral rites. They learned how to build and take care of the monastery, and how to teach. When the time was ripe to begin their own monastic community, they had been furnished with all the basic tools that they would need to survive and flourish.

Luang Por would sometimes speak about the qualities of a good teacher: he must understand the way his disciples' minds work, just as a carpenter must understand the particular qualities of each kind of wood. Or he must be like doctors who know their patients, the cause of their illness and the

appropriate medicine to cure their condition. Or, he would say, it's like fishing. If the fisherman casts his net at random over the whole of the river, he won't get any fish. He must wait until a fish breaks the surface of the water and then cast his net at exactly that spot. To teach, you have to look to see how much the student can take, he said, look at what's just right for them, because it's the 'just-rightness' that is the Dhamma.

Luang Por's ability to pitch his teachings on the just-right level was so unerring that it convinced many monks, after private conversation with him, that he had been reading their minds. This may well have been true, but in most cases, the effectiveness of his words may be as easily attributed to acute observation based upon long experience. Ajahn Suriyon gave an example:

"The Western disciples liked to see Luang Por laugh and smile and give them opportunities to ask questions. If he didn't do that and seemed indifferent towards them, they'd find it oppressive. So Luang Por would give them lots of attention, frequently asking them how they were, how their practice was going and so on."

The Thai monks didn't expect the same kind of personal attention.

"If he saw that Thai monks understood his teaching well enough, he didn't say much to them, but he'd find appropriate skilful means to teach monks who were dull or unintelligent. With monks of an angry or negative disposition, he would speak humorously or give examples that emphasized kindness and gratitude. Once they felt relaxed, the minds of these monks would become receptive to what he was teaching and experience some joy and uplift in the Dhamma. As a result, they would feel inspired and their practice would progress."

Ajahn Anek recalled another of the similes Luang Por used to describe the qualities of a teacher:

"He said, 'How could I be a teacher if I didn't understand the way my disciples' minds work? It's like the owner of a banana plantation. If he doesn't know all about bananas, their trunks, their leaves, their fruit, then how could he run a plantation? It's all just a matter of body and mind. It doesn't matter whether it's young monks, old monks, monastics

or laypeople. If their minds have fallen under the power of defilement, then there's no difference between them.' ”

Given Luang Por's profound understanding of the relationship between the body and mind, it was not difficult for him to recognize his disciples' dispositions. He would observe them walking, standing, sitting, lying down, changing posture, eating, bowing, working; he would notice their alertness and attention to detail when performing duties for him. Every action told him a story.

The Buddha once said that just as integrity is to be known through long acquaintance and fortitude through adversity, wisdom is to be measured by speech. Luang Por observed how monks conducted themselves and how they expressed themselves. Meanwhile, Ajahn Liem observed Luang Por:

“Mostly he would gauge monks' knowledge from how they spoke. He would observe their reflections on Dhamma and the wisdom that was revealed in their speech. At the end of the Rains Retreat, he would have all the monks and novices take turns to ascend the Dhamma seat and talk about their experiences during the retreat to the laypeople. This was one method he used to see how people's practice was going. Did they possess the qualities of a Dhamma speaker? You weren't to have any desire to give a talk, because then Luang Por considered that you were just following craving. He wanted to see who had a sense of responsibility. He wanted us to train in that way to see if we had any particular abilities. If we hadn't had to do that, we would never have known.”

Luang Por would say that once you can ground your mind in the present moment, everything is ready to teach you. Insights into the three characteristics arise naturally in the mind. Often, he would share his own reflections with those around him. His disciples would treasure these teachings and observations not so much because they were especially profound – although sometimes they were – but rather it was because they were grounded in a particular event in which the listener participated, and so took on an immediacy, an intimacy and context that was not easily forgotten. Ajahn Pasanno, for example, recounted how one morning while returning from alms-round, a pair of lizards copulating in a roadside

tree fell off their branch and landed right in front of Luang Por. Still stuck together, they lay on the ground looking stunned from the fall. Luang Por pointed at them chuckling:

Do you see that? They were enjoying themselves so much up there they became heedless. Now they've fallen down and hit the ground, it hurts.

Luang Por created an environment in which every element of monastic life provided challenges and learning opportunities for his disciples. His formal discourses provided his disciples with the reflective tools to profit from them. Sometimes there could be an almost sly quality to Luang Por's skilful means. He introduced small tests of mindfulness and wisdom for his disciples that were like the concealed traps of a hunter in the forest.

One monk remembered an almost comical example. In the midst of a relaxed and informal meeting under Luang Por's kuti – a number of conversations taking place at the same time – Luang Por must have sensed that things were becoming a little too exuberant and monks were losing their mindfulness in the pleasure of conversation. Without warning, he stopped speaking and began to sit in silence with eyes downcast. Monastic etiquette deems it impolite to carry on a conversation in front of one's teacher. The disciple takes his cue from the master: if the teacher speaks informally, so can he; if the teacher stops speaking, then so does the disciple. Immediately. But it is hard not to get caught up in a conversation, and easy to lose awareness of a situation. The monks carried on talking for a while. One by one, look by look, and then by a sudden avalanche of urgent nudges, they stopped and tried to compose themselves. As if in a theatrical skit, there remained a single monk relating some humorous anecdote and then, in one awful moment, realizing that the atmosphere had completely changed. Everyone around him was sitting impassively with eyes downcast. There was no need for Luang Por to utter any words of admonition.

In a similar vein, a monk recalled how, while walking to a local village on alms-round, Luang Por engaged him in conversation. In such a situation, etiquette demanded that he walk slightly behind Luang Por and to one side, with the remaining monks expected to walk some few steps behind.

All of a sudden, Luang Por stopped still. The monks whose minds had wandered collided with the monk in front of them, and the line came to a shuddering halt. Luang Por, looking very innocent, said nothing. At the next Dhamma talk, he spoke about the importance of mindfulness and alertness in every posture, for example, on alms-round.

Sense-restraint, circumspection, mindfulness and alertness, sensitivity to time and place – these were basic monastic virtues that Luang Por never tired of impressing on the minds of his disciples. He would say that, ‘someone who loses their mindfulness is no different from a madman.’ And he would quote the Buddha’s words:

*Heedfulness is the path to the deathless; heedlessness, the path to death.*

*Dhp 21*



#### WORLDLY WINDS

A monastery does not provide an escape from the vicissitudes of life. It does provide a framework in which a wise attitude towards them may

be cultivated. The Buddha referred to four pairs of transient conditions inherent in the human realm that needed to be clearly understood.

The Buddha taught that the eight worldly dhammas of gain and loss, status and obscurity, praise and blame, pleasure and pain are inescapable features of human life. Even liberated beings experience these conditions, but knowing them for what they are – impermanent, unreliable events – they remain unfazed by them.

Luang Por frequently reminded his disciples to maintain a contemplation of the nature of the eight worldly dhammas, and not to get pulled about by them. He said that only fools believed that they could enjoy the desirable worldly dhammas without encountering their undesirable counterparts – they were inseparable. His teachings on the eight conditions were often very practical. They commonly consisted of confronting monks with the consequences of attachment by depriving them of one of the four desirable worldly dhammas or provoking one of the undesirable ones. Luang Por might, for example, test a monk by praising him on a number of occasions and then, with no forewarning, roundly criticize him. The monk was encouraged to observe that the degree to which he was upset by the criticism was an indication of the degree to which he had identified with and taken pride in the praise.

On other occasions, Luang Por might give a monk a great deal of attention for a certain period of time and then completely ignore him for a while. The monk would be left feeling hurt, and forced to acknowledge that the pain he experienced was chiefly determined by the extent to which he had allowed himself to feel flattered with the attention and had indulged in a sense of being special or entitled.

#### TRANSMITTING THE THEORY

‘Lukewarm’ would probably best sum up the attitude of the forest monasteries of Isan to the academic study of Buddhadhamma. With their focus on the practice and realization of the truth of the teachings, the abbots of these monasteries have considered in-depth study of them to be a two-edged sword. While they recognize that a knowledge of key

teachings provides the necessary theoretical basis for practice, they have been suspicious of the seductive nature of study. Gaining more and more intellectual knowledge about the path can easily come to seem more important than actually walking it. Over the years, Luang Por gave many analogies for such an error: he said it was like a person who pores over a map but does not make the journey, or one who reads the label on the medicine bottle but does not take the medicine.

Luang Por and his contemporaries expressed concern at how book learning tended to stimulate the speculative, restless traits of their disciples' minds that other aspects of the training were designed to restrain. Most importantly perhaps, they were concerned by the way in which concepts absorbed from the texts created expectations in the minds of their disciples that hindered, rather than helped, their meditation. One of Luang Por's most well-known injunctions to newcomers was, 'Don't read books. Read your mind!'

You may know how to write the word 'greed', but when greed arises in your mind, it doesn't look like the word. Anger is the same: you may have it down on the blackboard as an arrangement of letters, but when anger arises in your mind, you don't have time to read anything – it's already too late. This is very important, extremely important. Your knowledge is correct – you've spelt the word correctly – but now you have to bring it inwards. If you don't do that, then you won't know the truth.

On reaching a state of meditative calm, he said, the tendency of the scholar is to instinctively reach for his knowledge of the texts to interpret what he is experiencing. That movement of the mind to name or classify the experience, causes the experience to dissolve.

If a student of the texts grasps on tightly to his knowledge and upon entering peaceful states likes to keep noting, 'What's this? Is it the first absorption yet?', then his mind will simply make a complete retreat from the calm and he'll get nothing from it. Why is that? Because he wants something. The moment there's craving to realize something, the mind withdraws from the calm. That's why you've got to throw away all your thoughts

and doubts, and take only your body, speech and mind into the practice. Look inwardly at states of mind, but don't drag your scriptures in there with you – it's not the place for them. If you insist on doing so, then everything will go down the drain, because nothing in the books is the same as it is in experience. It's precisely because of this attachment that people who study a lot, who have a lot of knowledge, tend to be unsuccessful in meditation.

It was not that the forest monks rejected study altogether. They were exceptionally thorough in their studies of the Vinaya, particularly of the *Pubbasikkhā* commentary. Indeed, the importance they gave this text is one of the defining characteristics of the whole tradition. Many monks had, moreover, also completed the Thai Sangha's national three-tier Dhamma-Vinaya curriculum (*Nak Tam*) before they became disciples of Luang Pu Mun (Luang Por himself falls into this category) and so, began their practice in the forest with a solid theoretical foundation.

Nevertheless, the forest Sangha's apparently dismissive attitude to study tended to raise the hackles of scholar monks, many of whom saw the forest monks as ignorant mavericks, following their own opinions rather than the words of the Buddha. In fact, a low-level mistrust between meditators and scholars has been a feature of Sangha life since the time of the Buddha. In one sutta, Ven. Mahā Cunda sensibly encourages the forest monks and scholars to appreciate each other's good qualities rather than criticize their shortcomings\*. In the case of Wat Pah Pong, the relationship with the scholarly community took a significant turn for the better in 1967, when a locally prominent scholar, Ajahn Maha Amorn, joined the Sangha and was enthusiastic in his praise of Luang Por.

In one respect, Luang Por's emphasis on oral transmission of the teaching within the context of a teacher-student relationship, was a return to the ways of early Buddhism. If there was a weakness to his impromptu style, it was that his Dhamma talks, being unsystematic by definition, did not cover the whole breadth of Buddhadhamma and were difficult to remember. Their strength lay in his grounding the theory of Dhamma (*pariyatti*)

\* AN 6.46

firmly within the lives of his disciples and their practice (*paṭipatti*) for liberation (*paticchedha*). He selected the teachings that he felt were of most benefit given the time and place and audience.

But in the first year at Wat Pah Pong, with a small community of just seven monks, Luang Por – ever the experimenter – was as yet undecided on the value of the *Nak Tam* curriculum. He decided to teach it himself in order to determine the advantages and disadvantages. It was the first time that he'd taken on such a role since his last frustrating Rains Retreat in Bahn Kor, after which he had embarked upon the life of the tudong monk.

He taught the course over a period of forty eight-hour days. In the cold season, the monks took the exams and all passed. But it was as he had feared: the monks found it hard to integrate the sense-restraint and single-mindedness required to develop their meditation practice with the memorization and discussion that are essential to study. ‘They forgot themselves’, he said simply. He found monks becoming neglectful of their meditation. The amount of socializing increased, together with its accompanying worldliness, mental agitation and formation of cliques. The serene atmosphere of the monastery was significantly diminished. He was, however, at pains to point out that the problem did not lie in study itself:

In fact, all the teachings point out the way for us to practise. But having begun to study, if you get caught up in chatting and frivolity and dispense with your walking meditation, then you'll start wanting to disrobe.

‘Actually’, he said, when performed mindfully, ‘reading and memorizing are forms of meditation.’ It’s not that study itself is at fault, but the lack of application and discernment on the part of the students.

Following his unsatisfactory experiences in this first year, Luang Por suspended the teaching of *Nak Tam*. In later years, however, when the number of monks had increased and Luang Por became concerned by how little knowledge they had of the basic teachings, he relented, delegating one of his senior disciples to provide the instruction. But familiar problems started to appear in the Sangha, outweighing the gains. Eventually, Luang Por compromised by allowing monks interested in pursuing their

studies to do so alone in their spare time. The monastery supplied the necessary textbooks and arranged for monks' official registration with the national examination board, but everything else was left to self-study. After the exams were over, Luang Por would tell the monks to put their books away and now concentrate on reading their minds. Study of the texts (pariyatti) was useful, he said, but should not become an end in itself. There was no true conclusion to such study. Without practicing the teachings, monks ran the risk of being like cowherds who'd never drunk milk. There was another kind of study, an internal pariyatti.

Are you just going to keep on studying endlessly without a fixed goal, or do you have an end in mind? Study is good, but it's an external pariyatti. The internal pariyatti requires you to study these eyes, these ears, this nose, this tongue, this body, this mind. It's the true pariyatti ... What happens when the eye contacts a form, the ears hear a sound, the nose smells an odour, the tongue tastes a flavour, the body contacts a tangible object, or a mental phenomenon arises in the mind? How does it feel? Is there still greed? Is there still aversion? Are you deluded by forms, sounds, odours, these ears, this nose, this tongue, this body, this mind? That is the internal pariyatti, and it has an end. You can graduate.

#### WORKING IS DHAMMA PRACTICE

Outside of the annual Rains Retreat period, various work projects were undertaken, most of which involved the building or repair of Sangha dwellings. Lack of funds determined that much of this work was performed by Sangha members, but even on occasions when the work could have been hired out, it was rare for Luang Por to give permission for that to be done.

Work projects provided opportunities for strengthening the cohesion and harmony of the community through concerted effort on tasks that, unlike meditation, had tangible, measurable results. Working for the common good provided a jolt for monks overly concerned with their own welfare, and increased the affection and sense of belonging that Sangha members felt for the monastery. Work projects were means by which Luang Por's disciples were encouraged to further develop those qualities

of consistent effort and patient endurance that Luang Por believed to be vital to progress in meditation. Certainly, manual labour for many hours a day in high temperatures and stifling humidity, sustained by one simple meal a day, was not for the faint-hearted.

Work projects gave monks the opportunity to practise mindfulness in more fluid situations, and afforded Luang Por the opportunity to monitor how well the monks could maintain their practice outside of the Dhamma Hall. Most of the monks were used to hard physical labour in the rice fields. In later years, when the community had grown much larger, work projects gave a means by which young monks and novices could channel any surplus out-going exuberance into useful activities.

On certain projects, Luang Por would keep the monks working until late into the night, surrounded by hurricane lamps that were besieged by insects. Some monks worried that their meditation practice was suffering. Luang Por replied:

This is practice. As you work, look at your mind. How does it feel when I ask you to perform this kind of task? Practice doesn't mean evading things all the time; you have to come out and face up to the defilements so that you know what they're like ... Once you've trained, then you have to climb up into the ring ... In the future, you will see the fruits. But for the time being, don't blame or praise, just do the work.

Every now and again, a disgruntled monk might leave, but the vast majority trusted in Luang Por's judgement. Ajahn Liem was one of those who thrived during this kind of practice.

“During work projects, Luang Por emphasized giving up our own comfort and desires for the benefit of others. This kind of sacrifice is the *dāna*, the giving of monks. It arises in a generous heart that considers the welfare of the community.

“In fact, there's plenty of time, but when we hurry, craving makes us feel that we're short of time ... At Wat Pah Pong we don't work with craving; we work in the spirit of self-sacrifice ... We show how making sacrifices for the group is a beneficial Dhamma practice.”

The most legendary of the Wat Pah Pong Sangha work projects was the four-month long construction of a road up a steep, thickly forested hill to Wat Tam Saeng Pet, a branch monastery some eighty kilometres to the north of Wat Pah Pong. Ajahn Anek was one participant.

“The head of the Highways Department said that if Luang Por had really decided to go ahead with the project, he would send people to help. But after two or three days, the men from the Highways Department had had enough – they couldn’t endure the *mamuy*\*. They said this level of work needs a proper budget; you need explosives and tractors; it can’t be done with this number of people. Luang Por sat there and said nothing. The day after the Highways people left, we made our own survey. Once we’d decided on where the road should go, we got down to work.

“There was hardly any time for rest. We would start work at three o’clock in the afternoon and finish at three in the morning. We got through one pair of flip-flops after another. The work mainly consisted of breaking up rocks and carrying them to where they were to be laid. After a time, the Highways Department saw that we weren’t going to give up, and every now and again they would bring up some explosives for us, and the villagers helped to set the charges.

“Luang Por would start teaching laypeople after the meal and he’d sit there right through until the afternoon without a break. We’d all have a rest during the middle of the day and afterwards when we came out, he’d still be sitting there talking with the laypeople. At three, he would start work and do the whole shift until three the next morning. Nobody could keep up with him. When he wasn’t supervising, he was raking the rubble. It was strange: we were all younger than Luang Por, but we had to admit that we couldn’t keep up with him. He would never be the one who suggested taking a break. At three in the morning we’d rest for a short time, and then at dawn, it was time to leave on alms-round. Everyone was exhausted, but he kept us going until the job was finished.

“It was really tough. We put our lives on the line. At one point, I sustained a haemorrhage and internal bruising: I felt a tightness in my

\* Latin: *mucuna pruriens*. A plant which, when touched, produces severe itchiness.

chest, I couldn't breathe properly. I think that was the start of my heart complaint.

"Everything had to be done well – well and quickly. If anyone started to make jokes or act playfully, Luang Por wouldn't say anything, but he'd immediately walk away. The next day there would be a Dhamma talk. He'd say, 'Act like a monk. Act like a Dhamma practitioner.' Whatever he did, he did with total sincerity. And however tired or weary he felt, I never once heard him complain."

In the mid-1970s, a new Uposatha Hall was constructed on a raised piece of land in the centre of the monastery, behind the Dhamma Hall and adjacent to Luang Por's kuti. As usual, most of the labouring work was done by the Sangha. One day, as the monks and novices carried earth up onto the mound on which the building was to be erected, and Luang Por stood at a distance overseeing the work, a group of teenaged boys approached him. They followed none of the prescribed etiquette for such a situation. The boys' leader, showing off to his friends, started to ask cheeky questions, culminating with, 'Why don't you tell the monks to meditate? Why do you make them work so much?' A deadpan Luang Por replied:

If they sit too much they get constipated.

He lifted up his walking stick and poked it into the gang leader's chest saying:

It's not only a matter of sitting or walking meditation. Meditation has to be balanced by working for the benefit of others and by the effort at every moment to maintain Right View and understanding. Go home and read about it. You're still wet behind the ears. If you don't know anything about Dhamma practice, keep your mouth shut about it; otherwise, you'll just make a fool of yourself.

## TORAMAN

One of the distinctive features of the training developed by Luang Por at Wat Pah Pong were practices aimed at thwarting the monks' desires in order to encourage them to look directly at the ways in which craving produced suffering, and how letting go of it led to peace. The Thai word for this kind of training is 'toraman'\*.

Quoting the Four Noble Truths, Luang Por would insist that suffering ceases not through turning our back on it, but by fully comprehending its nature:

If you don't want to suffer, then you won't see suffering. If you don't see suffering, then you won't fully comprehend it. And if you don't fully comprehend suffering, you won't be able to remove it from your mind.



The reason we don't free ourselves from suffering is, precisely, because we are always trying to get away from it. If you want to put out a fire, you have to pour water on the flames. Running away from suffering simply makes things worse.



You can climb on a plane, but the suffering will go with you. You can dive down into the ocean, but your suffering will dive down with you ... You may think that you're escaping it, but you're deluding yourself, because it's right there in your mind.



You must constantly reflect on Dhamma to firmly establish it in your mind. Dare to practice. Living with friends or with a large group should be the same as living alone. Be fearless. If anybody else wants to be lazy, then that's their business. Listen to the teachings. Don't argue with the teacher, don't be stubborn. Do

\*In every day usage, 'toraman' has lost its sense of training and now refers simply to torture or torment.

what the teacher tells you. Don't be afraid of practice. You will work it out by doing it. Of that, there's no doubt.

The training involved Luang Por requiring his disciples to do things that they didn't want to do, and not do things that they wanted to do. He emphasized that going against the grain was not to be seen as the goal itself, or as a practice that would inevitably lead to some form of purification. The rationale for the training was that it offered the opportunity to observe the way in which craving and attachment are often invisible if followed, and give rise to tension and frustration if opposed. Bearing with the discomfort mindfully, and looking closely at it, reveals its impermanent, suffering and not-self nature.

The practice took many forms, often quite mundane. On more strenuous work days, for example, a kettle of sweet drinks might arrive from the kitchen. On a cold winter day, the drink would be hot and, occasionally, Luang Por would allow the kettle to be placed under a tree in full sight of the monks without acknowledging it. Monks could not help but observe that, although up to that point they hadn't been feeling particularly tired or thirsty, now suddenly they could think of nothing other than enjoying a hot drink. If the monks worried about the drink getting cold before they got to drink it, they would immediately begin to suffer. As long as they kept their ears open for the invitation from Luang Por to stop work, the time would drag intolerably, and they would suffer. The moment they gave up, and put their minds on the work thinking, 'If there's a drink, there's a drink; if there's no drink, that's all right too', then the suffering would cease.

Toraman is a teaching strategy that demands that the students have great confidence in the teacher. If they harbour the slightest doubt about his wisdom or compassion, they will find it hard to follow this path consistently. The fortitude needed to bear with the unpleasant comes from believing in the ultimate benefit of doing so. Luang Por was able to command that faith without difficulty.

Luang Por would tell the monks that when they were put in uncomfortable situations and began to feel oppressed, it was important to recognize that it was the defilements, not they themselves, that were being opposed.

Only if they refused to assume ownership of the unpleasant sensations would they benefit from the practice. At mealtimes, he would say that the defilements want the food hot and fast; Dhamma wants the food cold and slow. When you don't get the food you want, how you want it, when you want it – how does it feel?

On weekend mornings, lay supporters from Warin and Ubon would arrive with food to offer for the Sangha's daily meal. The food tended to be richer than the usual daily fare, and it was an open secret that many monks looked forward to the weekend with pleasure. On days when the food was plentiful, Luang Por liked to sit talking to the donors after the food had been distributed, while his disciples sat – bowls full of food in front of them – struggling with feelings of restlessness, greed and hunger. Finally, after a period of time that to some of the monks had seemed excruciatingly long, but had, in fact, rarely lasted more than five or ten minutes, Luang Por would raise his hands and begin the blessing chant '*Yathā varivahā purā ...*', signalling the beginning of the meal. On some days, there would be an extra twist of the knife. It was Luang Por's custom to clear his throat before leading the blessing. This cough became an ardently awaited sound. Knowing this, Luang Por would occasionally cough in his usual way, pause for a moment, and then continue talking.

One fabled hot season toraman practice involved late morning meditation sessions in which the Sangha would dress in their full set of robes and sit in a room whose door and windows were closed in order to produce an almost overpowering heat and stuffiness. Before long, the monks would be soaked in sweat. Luang Por, sitting in their midst, would encourage them:

Come on! You've spent nine months in your mother's womb. This bears no comparison.

In the cold season, the practice was reversed. Luang Por would lead the monks in night-time meditation sessions wearing only their thin cotton angas and lower robe, while the windows were opened to receive the bitter north wind that cut its way through the monastery at that time of the year. At least, monks comforted themselves, it kept them free of drowsiness.

Luang Por's Dhamma talks are renowned for their capacity to fulfill the Buddha's injunction to instruct, inspire, encourage and exhilarate their listeners\*. But he did not always intend them to be so uplifting. Sometimes they played a different role in the training. Quite often, Luang Por spoke at great (rambling and repetitive) length simply in order that his audience would learn how to deal with the discomfort of sitting on a concrete floor for a long but indeterminate time. During the Rains Retreat of 1980, when his health was already in decline, he gave a seven-hour discourse. At one point during the talk, he looked around to see a number of the monks in front of him starting to squirm, and said, 'Are you suffering? Can you find a place in your mind where you don't suffer?'

One particular challenge these long talks posed was their uncertain duration. Monks could not tell themselves to grit their teeth for a certain length of time – Luang Por might stop after two or three hours or he might also carry on until the 3.00 a.m. wake-up bell. It was a memorable lesson in how the perception of time conditioned the ability to bear with the unpleasant; how letting go wasn't an ideal to work towards in the future, but an immediate necessity.

Physically, it was especially hard for the Western monks, as monastic etiquette prohibits listeners of a Dhamma talk from sitting in the cross-legged position. The only permissible posture on such an occasion is *papiap*, the 'polite' or 'side-saddle' posture. While the Thai monks had been sitting in this posture all their lives, it was, to the Westerners, an awkward and unbalanced way to sit, and certainly not a posture that they would have freely chosen for a seven-hour session. But during the course of such long talks, the advantage the Thais possessed through familiarity with the posture would fall away. They would join the Westerners in being able to see the arising and passing away of a whole spectrum of emotions: interest, inspiration, indifference, boredom, drowsiness, restlessness, irritation, resentment, and even – occasionally – acceptance and joy.

The policy of frustrating desire covered every area of monastic life. If Luang Por knew someone wanted to go somewhere very badly, then he

\* e.g. DN 1

wouldn't let him go. If he badly wanted to stay, he might well be sent away. Showing greed for requisites was sure to lead to grief.

A toraman regime is not without weaknesses; it is limited by its inherent elitism. It provides the best results in a small and highly motivated community. With a larger, more varied group, the stresses and strains experienced by the less motivated members can adversely affect the whole, creating a grim atmosphere in the monastery. Young monks can push themselves too hard, or become competitive. In addition, a teacher known to train his students in this way may be so intimidating to outsiders as to seriously reduce the number of people who are willing to take up the training in the first place.

Ideally, the trainer in toraman demonstrates that he himself is able and willing to do everything he demands of his students. This was very much the case with Luang Por, who made a point of leading from the front and of not only sharing in the hardships of his students, but exceeding them. However, as Luang Por got older and his health declined, he relaxed a number of these practices. It is debatable as to what extent this change was influenced by the waning of his own physical powers, and to what extent it was a response to a larger Sangha that lacked the intensity of the earlier years. Whatever the case, the underlying principle remained constant:

Practice means going against the stream – against the stream of our mental activity, against the stream of defilements. Counteracting a stream is always difficult. It's difficult to row a boat against the current, and because of the flow of our defilements, it's difficult to do good. We don't want to go against the stream, we don't want difficulties, we don't want to have to endure. Mostly, we just want to go with the flow of our moods, like water that follows its natural course. That may be comfortable, but it's not the way of practice. Practice is characterized by going against the grain, going against the defilements and the mind's old ways. It demands mindful suppression, increasing our patient endurance.

Many of Luang Por's most rousing exhortations concerned the struggle with defilements. He once gave a simple rule of thumb: any monk who

had not broken down into tears of frustration at least three times in his practice hadn't been putting forth enough effort. 'Don't follow the mind's desires!' was a constant refrain. 'Train it. This practice means putting your life on the line.' His disciples were to push through obstacles, recognize their lack of substance and realize that they were paper tigers. 'If you're sleepy and you want to sleep – don't! After you've got through the drowsiness then you can sleep.' On one occasion, he exhorted the Sangha on the battle against defilements that could occur between alms-round and the daily meal:

Sometimes you get back from alms-round and you're sitting there meditating before the meal, but you can't do it. Your mind's like a mad dog, slobbering with desire for food, and it won't contemplate anything at all. Or else the contemplation can't keep up with the greed, and so you just run with the greed – and then things really go downhill. If your mind won't listen and refuses to be patient – push your bowl away. Don't let it eat. Train your mind. Torment the defilements. Don't keep following them. Push your bowl away and leave. If there's so much craving to eat, if your mind won't listen to you, then don't eat. The saliva will dry up when it realizes it's not going to get any food. It'll have learned its lesson, and in future it won't disturb you. It'll be afraid of going without. It'll be silent. Give it a try. If you don't believe me, then see for yourself.

He would talk a lot about courage, of daring to go against the defilements, and how it was faith that takes us beyond the fears of hunger, pain and death. He pointed out how fear of suffering hobbles the mind, and how reflecting on what's really essential to life can overcome that:

Reflect on what's most important in life. What is that – the most important thing? It's the thing without which you'd die. That's what's important ... And all you really need to keep alive is plain rice and water. Everything else is a bonus. As long as you have a sufficient amount of rice and water to eat every day, you won't die. Be frugal. When you lack something you want, then ask yourselves whether the lack of it will kill you. Take enough rice and water to give you strength to practise. Don't worry about

whether or not you get anything in excess of rice and water; the important thing is that you have enough of those two things to keep you alive. And there need be no fear of going without them. Alms-round, in even the poorest villages, will provide a monk with a lump of sticky rice.

If it starts to drizzle while you're practising walking meditation, then think of those times when you were farming, your working trousers still not dry from the previous day and, first thing in the morning, having to put them on wet. Going down to get the water buffalo out of the pen below the house. Outside all you can see is its neck, but then when you pick up the rope you realize it's covered in shit, and then the buffalo flicks its tail and splatters you all over with even more of it. As you walk to the fields your foot-rot is playing up and you're thinking, 'Why is life so much suffering? Why is everything so hard?' Think of that, and then ask yourself what the big problem is about walking meditation in the rain. Working in the paddy fields involves much more suffering and you've managed that. Why can't you do this?

You have to dare to do it, dare to practise. If you've never been to a cremation forest, then you should train yourself to go. If you can't manage it at night, then go during the day. Go later in the day, go often, and after a while, you'll be able to go there at dusk.

By going against the grain, monks could discover for themselves that the fears and limitations holding them back were not fixed and unalterable things, but merely the results of habit that they had the capacity to overcome.

Luang Por was blunt about those who only put effort into what they enjoyed and avoided what they disliked or feared. They were deluding themselves if they thought they were practitioners of Dhamma. No matter how long monks had been in robes, 'if you are still following your likes and dislike, you haven't even started to practice.' There was no alternative to total commitment.

If you're really practising, then, to put it simply, it's your life, your whole life. If you're really sincere, then why would you

be interested in whether someone else is getting something that you're not, or if they're trying to pick a quarrel with you. There's nothing like that in your mind. Other people's actions are their own business. Whether other people's practice is on a high or low level, you don't give attention to things like that. You pay attention to your own affairs. It's when you have this attitude that you find the courage to practise. And through the practice, wisdom and profound knowledge will arise.

If your practice is in the groove, when you're really practising, then it's night and day. At night time, you alternate sitting and walking meditation, at least two or three times. Walk and then sit. Sit and then walk. You don't feel like you've had enough, you're enjoying yourself.

Discourses would switch back and forth between descriptions of the well-practising monk and pointing out how far his students were from that level, how much work they needed to do. He gave an analogy for his students who were still following their likes and dislikes and not facing up to challenges:

It's like your roof has a leak in it over here, and so you go and sleep over there; and then it starts to leak over there, and so you shift somewhere else and spend your time lamenting, 'When will I ever have a nice place to live in?' If the roof was to become full of leaks, you'd probably just move out. That's not the way to practise. If you follow your defilements, things just get much worse. The more you follow them, the more your practice declines.

And then would come the encouragement:

But if you go against the grain and keep practising, eventually you'll find yourself amazed at your mind's incredible appetite for practice. At this stage, you become completely uninterested whether other people are practising or not – you just constantly work at your own practice. Whether people come or go, you just keep doing your work. It's this looking at yourself that is the practice. Once you're fluent, then there's nothing in your mind except for Dhamma.

In whatever area you still can't do it, wherever you still have an obstruction, the mind circles around that spot. It won't give up until the problem's been cracked. And when that problem's been dealt with, then the mind gets stuck somewhere else. And so you work on that, and you don't give up until you've cracked that one too, because there can be no real sense of ease until these matters are seen to. Your reflections need to be firmly focused on the issue in hand, whether you're walking or sitting.

The problem that the meditator now faces becomes all-absorbing. He feels the weight of an unresolved issue or an ongoing responsibility. Luang Por said it felt like being a parent:

You leave your child to play by itself upstairs while you go down to feed the pigs. While you're doing that, you're anxious all the time that your child is going to fall off the veranda. It's the same with our practice. Whatever we're doing, we don't forget our meditation object for a moment. As soon as we become distracted, it immediately beats at the mind. We keep following it night and day, not forgetting it for a moment. Practice has to reach that level for it to be successful. It's not an easy task.

As the practice progresses it gains momentum. There is less need for the teacher:

To begin with, it's necessary to depend on the teacher and his advice. When you understand, then put it into practice. It's up to you to do the work yourself. If you are negligent in any area or something bad arises, then you will know for yourself. There will be the knowing, it will be *paccattam*. The mind will know naturally whether it's a big fault or a small one. It will try to look at just where the fault lies, try to do its practice.

## JOY IN THE DHAMMA

It was considered normal, and not necessarily a bad thing in itself, that monks putting forth effort to overcome defilements became tense at times or felt frustrated. Luang Por would say that if monks felt no inner resistance to their practice, then they probably weren't doing enough

to oppose old habits. He would, nonetheless, keep his finger on the pulse of the community and a clear eye out for signs of monks becoming obsessive or depressed. If he felt the atmosphere was too intense, he would invite the Sangha around to his kuti for an informal gathering. On these evenings, the atmosphere was warm and intimate. He would often relate anecdotes from the old days or tell funny and uplifting teaching stories. However long the sessions lasted – and even if they went on until well after midnight, everybody was still expected to be at the 3.00 a.m. morning session – nobody would want to leave. One monk summed it up:

“Walking away from Luang Por’s kuti one time I thought, ‘These are the nights I’ll remember when I’m an old man.’”

Luang Por had a deep well of stories. In addition to a lifetime of experience with monks and their flaws to draw upon, he also knew how to adapt local folk tales and humorous stories for teaching purposes. Much of the enjoyment these stories provide depends on familiarity with the culture they mirror, and they often lose a lot in translation. But the tale of the *plachon* gives something of their flavour.

Ajahn Tongjun heard Luang Por tell this story at a time when a number of younger monks had caught the teaching bug. It was a common phenomenon amongst monks whose meditation practice was starting to progress. Armed with a vocabulary gleaned from Luang Por’s Dhamma talks, these monks – ‘hot with knowledge’ – tended to make a nuisance of themselves sharing their insights at great length with whoever would listen, or could not escape. The story Luang Por told dealt with fishing, a subject familiar to all the monks, and featured the *plachon*, or serpent-headed fish, considered by many to resemble the human penis. Ajahn Tongjun recounted the story as he remembered Luang Por telling it:

There was once a newly married couple who, following the old tradition, lived in the wife’s family home. The young husband was constantly trying to find ways to impress his mother- and father-in-law: he wanted them to see what a capable son-in-law they had acquired, how hard-working he was, how good he was at making a living.

Every evening, the young man would accompany his father-in-law down to a nearby stream where he would set a catfish trap – a bamboo basket weighed down with rocks, containing a lump of termite mound full of termites as bait. Early in the morning, the young man would check his catch.

In those days people were very poor, cloth was hard to come by, and the young man had no underpants. After he'd taken off his trousers on the river bank, he would go down into the water naked. On one particular day, he found that the trap was crammed full of the lucrative catfish thrashing around wildly, unmixed with the *plamor* (climbing perch) or plachon that earned a lower price. It was a very good catch. The young man was so overjoyed with his success that he forgot to put his trousers back on before running back to the house with the trap full of fish, eager for the praise he felt sure that he would receive. He bounded up the stairs to the house still marvelling to himself, ‘nothing but catfish!’, and rushed in on his wife who was rinsing the sticky rice grains. Hearing his voice, she looked up, only to see him standing before her stark naked saying, ‘Nothing but catfish.’ Pointing to his groin she said, ‘Then where did the plachon come from?’ Her words broke the spell and the young man looking down at his nakedness, turned bright red, before sprinting back to the stream for his trousers.

Luang Por told the young monks that wanting to show off about their practice, oblivious of their embarrassing faults visible to everyone, made them just like the young man who was so keen to impress his family that he didn't realize that he was exposing his plachon.

#### GOVERNANCE OF THE SANGHA

The Sangha is structured hierarchically with seniority determined by length of time spent as a monk, measured by annual Rains Retreats (a monk of ten years standing, for example, is referred to as a monk of ‘ten rains’). The Buddha’s teachings on the qualities that leaders of monastic communities should possess tend to focus on moral and spiritual values. There is little detailed discussion of the exercise of power. The Vinaya

texts do, however, make it clear that unanimity should be sought in community decisions on contentious matters. On the other hand, the will of the majority may be the guide in minor issues where strong feelings are unengaged, and a vote will not alienate the minority and affect the harmony of the Sangha.

As Buddhism evolved in Thailand, it became more institutionalized, and the dominant model for governance of monastic communities that emerged was of a benevolent dictatorship tempered by the checks and balances embedded in the Vinaya. This development was conditioned by many factors, not least of which were the laws of the land which put various legal powers in the hands of abbots whose appointments had to be recognized by the state.

As most of those who join a forest monastery do so out of faith in the abbot and with a willingness to submit to his judgement in the matter of their training, a system in which power resides primarily with him is uncontroversial. The system's paternalism may be traced back to the Buddha's declaration that the relationship between teacher or preceptor and student should be modelled upon that of father and son. The integrity of the system is dependent upon the fact that membership in the Sangha is completely voluntary, and that no barriers are put in the way of those who wish to leave. This, combined with the demand for leaders to keep all the Vinaya training rules without exception, means that the scope for abuse of power is severely limited.

Luang Por's style of leadership largely conformed to the benevolent dictator template. However, his emphasis on creating a durable institution that was not overly tied to him and that could survive and prosper independently of him, led him to tweak it in significant ways. Luang Por took almost all major decisions himself, but he made a point of listening to the views of his disciples and encouraging them to express their opinions in an appropriate fashion and at an appropriate time and place. Ajahn Suriyon recalled:

“First of all, he would determine a basic plan or principle, and then he would ask for the opinions of the Sangha; if it was appropriate, he would also consult the laypeople. In some cases, his idea might have some

weakness, and he was able to modify it. Often his idea was good, but by listening to other views he was able to know what the general feeling was and address any worries there might be.”

Luang Por was an intimidating figure by dint of his position, his personality, his charisma, and the belief that almost all shared that he was an enlightened being. There was no question that he possessed the natural authority to exercise his will without consultation. But he chose to give his disciples the sense that he listened to them, and that he could be flexible when faced with intelligent arguments. The system worked well because, ultimately, the monks’ confidence in his judgement was such that they were able to accept his decisions even if they did not always agree with them.

There were many occasions in which Luang Por made use of formal meetings of the Sangha to deal skilfully with community issues. The decision as to whether to allow a monk from another tradition to attend the *Pātimokkha* recitation mentioned above, is one example. Another occasion in which he found himself in disagreement with the main body of the Sangha occurred when a lay supporter asked permission to offer a vehicle to the monastery. Luang Por had told the would-be donor that, before giving an answer, he would have to consult with the Sangha. At the next formal gathering of the community, he canvassed opinions on the matter. Assuming the outcome to be a foregone conclusion, those called upon to speak were enthusiastic; a monastery vehicle could be used when Luang Por went to visit branch monasteries; it could be used in the case of a medical emergency; there were so many ways in which it would be useful. When it came time to offer his summation, however, Luang Por surprised the whole assembly by announcing that he opposed the motion, and then went on to rebut, one by one, all of the arguments that had previously been put forward to support it. The emotional impact of his words was considerable.

Personally, I have a different view on this from all of you. The way I see it, as monks, or *samaṇas* – in other words, men of peace – we should be content and of few wishes. In the mornings, we carry our bowls out on alms-round and receive food from the villagers to sustain our bodies. Most of the villagers are poor. If we live

on the food they offer us, and we have a vehicle and they don't – think about it – how would that look?

We should be aware of our status as disciples of the Buddha. Given that the Buddha never had a vehicle, I say it's better that we don't either. If monks do start accepting vehicles, then sooner or later there'll be news about this monastery's vehicle overturning and that one's knocking someone over. It'll be an utter mess. And these things are a real burden to look after.

Formerly monks had to walk everywhere. In the old days if you went on *tudong*, you'd never get a lift in a car like nowadays. If you went on *tudong*, then it really was *tudong*: up mountains and down to the valley floors – you'd walk everywhere. You'd walk until your feet were covered in blisters. But these days, people say they're going on *tudong* and they go by car. They go to tour around different regions, they drive right through the forests [literally: 'they *taludong*']. It doesn't matter if we don't have a vehicle. What does matter is that you practise well. Then when the celestial beings (devas) see you, they will be filled with faith and inspiration. That's why I'm not going to accept this vehicle that they want to offer. It'll be even more convenient; you won't have to tire yourselves out washing and wiping it. Please remember this point: don't allow yourselves to be swayed by the wish for convenience and ease.

After the meeting, one senior monk said with a rueful smile on his face, 'It was like we attached targets to our chests for the firing squad.'

One year, when many temporary monks were spending the Rains Retreat in the monastery, a theft occurred. Inquiries and appeals for the missing object to be returned all proved fruitless. Finally, Luang Por announced that they would have to take recourse to the ancient method by which, one-by-one, each member of the community would make a solemn vow of their innocence, calling upon them and their families to be cursed for seven generations if they told a lie.

After he had let this sink in for a while, Luang Por announced that, before he took such a drastic step, he would give the guilty party one last chance.

Everyone was told to return to their kuti, make a small bundle, and then, on returning to the darkened Dhamma Hall, place it on a pile in the middle of the floor. When all the bundles had been deposited and the monks were sitting at their places, lanterns were lit and the bundles were examined. The missing article was discovered in the middle of the pile.

Disputes amongst members of the Sangha were infrequent but not unheard of. When the quarrelling parties were summoned to his kuti, Luang Por would refuse to accept that either party was completely in the right or wrong. He would say that both sides must have contributed to the dispute to some extent or other, and both were culpable. Ajahn Suriyon was present at probably the most extreme incident to occur.

“There was a dispute the year I arrived. It reached the point where one monk started chasing after the other with a knife in his hand. Luang Por showed no sign of fear or hesitation. He spoke from his seat in a very normal voice. The monk came back, put down the knife and started to cry ... Overall there were very few problems. Maybe it was the power of the Dhamma, of the virtue and goodness that Luang Por had accumulated. Even if there were odd incidents, there were no harmful consequences, there was never any danger. When Luang Por spoke, then that would be the end of it; people could put down their enmity. He wouldn’t allow us to drag up old matters.”

The knife-waving incident and Luang Por’s response to it were exceptional. It was clearly understood by all at Wat Pah Pong that physical violence was completely unacceptable. Nevertheless, one day many years later, monks leaving the Dhamma Hall after the evening practice session came across two teenaged novices in the midst of a fight, lashing out at each other with their flashlights. The following day, after evening chanting, the Sangha was convened below Luang Por’s kuti. Ajahn Supon was one of the monk’s present.

“After Luang Por had instructed us on a number of matters, he eventually told the two novices to come out to the front, where he questioned them about what had occurred the previous evening. After he’d examined them, he said that in the twenty-five years since he’d established the monastery, this was the first time that there had been a fight amongst the

novices. He explained concisely why it was such a bad thing to happen, and then he made an announcement to the Sangha.”

On consideration, I see no benefit in allowing these two novices to live here anymore. Although one of them has only recently gone forth and his actions are more forgivable, this other one has been here two years and not only is he still unable to set a good example to others, he has also behaved unacceptably. I see no point in the two of them continuing here. What is the opinion of the Sangha?

After Luang Por had spoken in that way, nobody dared to say anything. If anyone had spoken up with good reasons why they should be allowed to stay, there might have been a different outcome – but there was silence. Luang Por finally asked Ajahn Virapon to provide a response on behalf of the Sangha. Ajahn Virapon said he agreed with Luang Por. At first, Luang Por threatened to have the novices disrobe there and then and go home in their bathing cloths, but in the end, he allowed them to stay until the following morning.

When another fight broke out between two young monks the following year, Luang Por was more peremptory:

Get out! If you’re going to act like that, then you can’t stay here.  
Go! You can’t live with me. Find a pair of trousers.

It was the last of such incidents.

## DELEGATION

An important element of Luang Por’s efforts to create a strong Sangha was his policy of delegating authority. In the Vinaya texts, the appointment of ‘officers of the Sangha’ requires a short ceremony to be performed at a formal meeting of the Sangha; at Wat Pah Pong, it was more relaxed. Luang Por would simply announce that he was appointing such-and-such a monk to take on specific responsibilities: to act as the monastery secretary or storekeeper; to look after the cloth cupboard; to take responsibility for assigning lodgings; or, in later days, to oversee the electricity supply. Monks were chosen on the basis of their competence for the particular

task and were cautioned to perform their duties diligently and impartially, free from bias caused by greed, aversion, delusion and fear.

As monks became more senior, Luang Por required them to give Dhamma talks and sent many of his most trusted disciples away to establish branch monasteries. In 1979 and 1981, he spent the Rains Retreat elsewhere, partly in order to give his designated successor, Ajahn Liem, and other senior monks experience in running Wat Pah Pong in his absence. This proved a prescient move as it enabled the monastery to adapt remarkably well when Luang Por became seriously ill and unable to continue as abbot from late 1981 onwards.

Luang Por sought to encourage his disciples to contribute to the welfare of the community in whatever way they could. Everyone had something to offer.

It's like the trees at Wat Pah Pong. Every one of them is of benefit: the small trees, the big trees, the short and the long and the bent. All are useful if we know how to select the right one for the job in hand.

Luang Por would often comment on how other forest monasteries had drastically declined after the death of the abbot. This was always a danger when the loyalty and devotion of the monks was almost exclusively focused on the teacher, while the fostering of a sense of community and loyalty to the monastery itself was neglected. Luang Por did not want this to happen at Wat Pah Pong. Giving the monks responsibilities gave them experience, self-confidence and, above all, a sense of participation and belonging.

Luang Por spoke often of respect for the Sangha, and how the welfare of the Sangha must always take precedence over that of the individual. Nevertheless, when he felt that the Sangha had overstepped its authority or behaved unwisely, he would provide an admonishment. One such occasion occurred when the disquiet felt by many members of the Sangha at the behaviour of one of the senior monks reached a tipping point.

The monk in question was one of the more eccentric figures at Wat Pah Pong. He was known for his love of chanting and for his bubbly, sometimes

slightly manic, outgoing personality. His behaviour, especially towards lay supporters, was considered by many monks to be undignified and inappropriate. Matters came to a head when, in the absence of Luang Por, the Sangha convened a meeting to discuss the monk's behaviour and, after a vote, decided that he should be formally censured. The monk accepted the Sangha's decision with good grace but was deeply hurt. He insisted that he had no bad intentions; it was just that every now and then he forgot himself. Everyone awaited Luang Por's return and his decision on how to proceed.

On the evening of his return, the Sangha gathered below Luang Por's kuti. He listened in silence to the account of the Sangha meeting. Then, without asking any questions and without hearing the accused monk give his side of the story, he began to give a Dhamma talk.

He spoke about how character traits varied. Even the great arahants had different habits and personalities – the result of kamma they had created in the past – which were unconnected with defilement and remained after enlightenment. He mentioned Ven. Sāriputta, who had previously been born as a monkey for many lifetimes, and, as a result, every now and again acted in an eccentric, almost monkey-like fashion – most famously by occasionally jumping over puddles.

Differences of personality were also to be seen amongst those still striving to cleanse their minds of defilement. There were those of a predominantly lustful temperament, those with a negative, fault-finding mentality and those with a slow and dull disposition. There were those given to thought and worry, those with a devout temperament, and those with a naturally intelligent disposition.

The differences between these character types are superficial. Ultimately, they are all one and the same: they're all equally impermanent, unsatisfactory and selfless, all ungraspable. Like a lemon, a chilli, sugar cane and borapet. All these things are born of the earth, but their flavour is different. The lemon has a sour flavour, the chilli is hot, the sugar cane is sweet and borapet is bitter. Their unity lies in the fact that once born of the earth, they all have to die.

Luang Por's teacher Luang Pu Tongrat was acknowledged as a monk of high attainments but was never a greatly loved figure. He could be rude and aggressive and act in eccentric ways. Many people thought he was crazy.

On one occasion, the villagers – I don't know whether they did it on purpose in order to provoke him or what – put a live fish in his bowl. They'd only just caught it and it was still tied up in jute twine. He received it in his bowl and then took it down to a stream and released it. He said to the fish, 'Well, it's better, my child, than if they'd killed you.' When he died, his only possession was a razor; he had no other possessions. At his funeral a strong wind blew up, and it poured with rain just for a moment and then stopped – just enough to see that it was a marvel.

The reason that I have told stories like this is so that all of you may see that sometimes strangeness is not so strange at all, it's normal.

Luang Por admonished the Sangha for making too much out of a minor matter. Their efforts should be put into developing the path of practice, not into finding fault with each other. There were always going to be monks whose behaviour was not particularly inspiring.

Don't let your feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction be your criteria. If you do that, you will be elevating your moods above the Dhamma. Whatever you do, you must be circumspect and use your wisdom faculty. Some things will be too small, some too big, some to your liking and some not, but if the matter doesn't involve transgression of the Vinaya, then you should be able to let it go.

Monks should not waste their time in meaningless disputes.

It's like the two monks who started arguing about when the sun is closest to the earth. One said in the morning, because that's when it's biggest. The other said at noon, because that's when it's hottest. They went to ask the teacher to adjudicate. He said, 'Go and eat your lunch.'

## IV. A WELL-ROUNDED TRAINING

### PUTTING FORTH EFFORT

One of the foundations of Buddhist practice is the conviction that purposeful effort has meaning. The Buddha rejected the beliefs that human life is determined by a divine will or fate or randomness. He proclaimed that human beings created their own life and environment by the quality of their actions of body, speech and mind. Luang Por's teachings expressed this 'Right View' again and again. Monks were to take responsibility for their lives through their own consistent efforts. They all had the potential for liberation within them. The question was whether they had the determination and the patient endurance to realize that potential.

Don't just sit there waiting for Nibbāna to come to you. Have you ever seen anyone successful in that way? Wherever you see you're in the wrong, then quickly remedy it. If you've done something incorrectly, then do it again properly. Reflect on experience.

There was no alternative to hard work.

Some people become monks thinking that they'll be able to take it easy and enjoy life. But if you've never learned to read, you can't just pick up a book and start to read it ...

Some people come here to become monks in order to find happiness. But what does happiness arise from? What is its cause? Hardship must come first. Don't you have to work before you have the money to buy food? To farm the land before you get rice to eat? Hardship precedes happiness.

One phrase in particular, monks heard again and again over the years:

Eating little, sleeping little, talking little: these are the actions of the practitioner. Eating a lot, sleeping a lot, talking a lot: these are the actions of the fool.

## PATIPADĀ

Monks often take on special observances in order to get out of a rut or in the hope of accelerating their practice. At the very least, by doing so they exercise powers of diligence, vigour and renunciation, all of which are important qualities for monks to cultivate. However, Luang Por would remind those of his disciples prone to putting their faith in radical but unsustainable asceticism to look closely at the intention behind their undertakings. A short period of heroic effort followed by a longer lazy period of recuperation was not, he insisted, a wise or effective strategy for dealing with defilement. Craving for results too easily infected a mind set up in this way. For him, the key to success was *patipadā*: steady, consistent, continuous practice\* – the tortoise rather than the hare.

Don't pay any attention to whether you're feeling diligent or lazy. Normally, people do things when they feel diligent and stop when they feel lazy; but as monks that's not how we conduct ourselves. Whether we feel lazy or diligent, we practice. We have no interest other than cutting things off, in abandoning them, in training ourselves. We are consistent day and night, this year and next, at all hours, indifferent to feelings of laziness or diligence, hot or cold. We just keep doing it. This is called *patipadā*.

Sometimes monks get really gung-ho and sustain it for six or seven days. But when they see they're not getting anywhere they give up. And then they really lose it for a while, chatting and socializing in a heedless way, until they come to their senses and put in another couple of days of hard effort. Then they give up again until the next time they feel inspired, and that becomes the pattern. It's like people who throw themselves into their work like there's no tomorrow – digging fields, clearing trees, clearing hillsides – and then when it's time to take a break, throw their tools down and walk off without putting them away. By the following morning, the tools are completely caked with mud.

\*This is the definition adopted by the Thai Forest Tradition. In fact, this Pali word simply means 'way of practice' and may be beneficial or unbeneficial depending on context. Here, it may be understood as an abbreviation of '*sammā patipadā*', or 'Right Practice'.

Then they get enthusiastic for the work again and in the evening throw their tools down once more. This is not the way to prepare fields for cultivation, and it's the same for our practice. If you don't think *paṭipadā* is important, you'll have no success. *Paṭipadā* is absolutely vital.

Making fire was another of Luang Por's favourite analogies for this principle, one that allowed him to perform a favourite short pantomime. As he spoke – and with a big smile on his face – he would mime the fool who rubs two sticks together until he becomes tired or bored, puts them down for a while before picking them up once more, expecting to carry on from where he'd left off. Finally, he gives up altogether and compounds his error by insisting that he knows from experience that it's not possible to get fire from wood. 'There *is* fire there', Luang Por said, 'but you're only going to produce it if you keep rubbing the sticks without interruption until the critical temperature has been reached.' In the same way, practice can only bear fruit when it is developed in a similarly steady manner. Short bursts of effort, no matter how intense, cannot create the necessary momentum.

A fisherman casts his net and catches a huge fish. He becomes afraid that the fish is going to jump out of the net and get away. He becomes so anxious he grabs at the fish wildly, struggles to get a grip on it. Suddenly, just as he feared, the fish is out of the net; but it escapes because his own efforts to grasp hold of it are too violent.

There's an old saying, 'Gently, gently does it – but not too gently.' That's our practice. Keep feeling things out, feeling them out. Don't give up. You have to look at the mind, understand what it's all about. Try to keep doing the practice, making it consistent. If you're feeling lazy, do the practice. If you're not feeling lazy, do the practice. That's the kind of continuity that's needed.

He often repeated that the craving to get something or become something would always sabotage even the most determined effort:

The Buddha taught that putting forth effort is for abandonment, for letting go, for withdrawing from attachment. There should be no desire for becoming and birth, to get or to be anything at all.

This effort was to be constantly monitored and tweaked, the goal being a balanced level called ‘*por dee*’, ‘just-right’. Putting forth effort that, moment by moment, was maintained at the optimum intensity for achieving one’s purpose, Luang Por defined as ‘right practice’.

Putting forth effort is not restricted to a particular posture. You can do it while standing, walking, sitting and lying down. You can realize Dhamma while sweeping leaves, or merely by looking at a sun-beam. It is essential that mindfulness be constantly primed. Why? Because when you are intent on discernment of the truth, there are opportunities to realize the Dhamma at all times and in all places.

#### KNOWING NOW

Luang Por often said that the present moment encompasses everything: it includes past and future because it is the result of the former and the cause of the latter. For this reason, developing the ability to dwell with clarity in the present moment is perhaps the most fundamental of all meditation skills. However, Luang Por said the value of it did not just lie in the lucid calm that resulted from letting go of memory and imagination – it was in the present moment that wisdom could be cultivated:

In Dhamma practice, all you have to do is keep looking at the present moment ... Look at the instability, the impermanence, and ‘Buddha knowing’ will arise and grow. Keep seeing the truth of all things – that they are impermanent. Pleasure and pain arise and they’re impermanent, it’s unsure how long they’ll last. If our mind sees the uncertain duration of things, the problem of attachment will gradually diminish.

The past was gone; the future had not yet arrived. Suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path towards its end all lie in the present moment.

This practice of staying in the present is mental cultivation. To put it simply, we must be mindful, have a constant awareness and recollection, knowing what is occurring right now, what we're thinking, what we're doing, what's going on with us. We must look at our mind, constantly mindful of our mood, our thoughts, whether we're experiencing pleasant or unpleasant feelings, whether we are in the right or in the wrong. Reflecting, investigating in this way, the wisdom faculty has already manifested ... the eyes see a form, the ears hear a sound, the nose smells an odour, the tongue experiences a flavour, the body a touch – whatever is felt is known. Whether we think something is good or bad, we like it or dislike it, it's all impermanent, unsatisfactory and not self. The Buddha taught us to put these things down, not to grasp on to them. This is called solving problems.

#### MAI NAE

In the last five or six years of his teaching career, most of Luang Por's Dhamma talks were recorded on audio cassette. In this collection of talks, now stored digitally, Luang Por deals with a wide variety of themes, amongst which one frequently repeated teaching stands out – that of '*mai nae*'. The phrase '*mai nae*' translates most readily as 'unsure', 'uncertain', 'changeful' or 'indefinite'<sup>\*</sup> and is an everyday term that all of Luang Por's audience would have immediately understood. A farmer, for example, asked in the planting season whether he expected to get a good harvest that year, would most probably reply, 'Mai nae. If we get enough rain, it should be all right.' The phrase '*mai nae*' here, is a simple recognition that things are affected by many variable conditions (e.g. how much rain falls) and are thus never completely predictable.

Luang Por taught his disciples to practise the perception of '*mai nae*' as a means of cultivating the wisdom faculty. By constantly reminding themselves that both internal and external phenomena were '*mai nae*', they developed *aniccasaññā* (the perception of impermanence), and with

<sup>\*</sup>The Pali word closest to the idea of '*mai nae*' is '*vipariñāma*', usually rendered in English as 'subject to change'.

practice, the associated perception of *dukkha* (the inherently flawed, ultimately unsatisfactory nature of experience) and *anattā* (the conditioned, selfless nature of experience). These perceptions of the ‘three characteristics of existence’ created a pathway for *vipassanā*, the deep, wordless insight that uproots defilements and leads to the end of suffering.

The practise of ‘mai nae’ achieves its power from directly confronting the ingrained tendency of unawakened beings to invest experience with the appearance of solidity. This sense that the things within and without us are real and substantial is founded upon unexamined assumptions. The perception of changefulness became the tool Luang Por most often recommended to challenge those assumptions. Luang Por chose to use the phrase ‘mai nae’ in preference to the more traditional ‘*aniccam*’ or ‘impermanent’, to bring a fresh slant on wisdom development. For his disciples, ‘mai nae’ was a familiar, approachable idea, deeply embedded in the culture. It demystified Dhamma practice and made it seem immediately practical.

The specific emphasis of the ‘mai nae’ practice may be examined by comparing it to the comparable phrase ‘this too will pass’. Whereas ‘this too will pass’ reminds us of a future beyond the present experience and so puts it into perspective, ‘mai nae’ points to the nature of the present phenomena itself.

In daily life, Luang Por taught that the ‘mai nae’ reflection was particularly effective in dealing with attachment to ideas and views. In this context, the word might be better translated as ‘maybe not’. Whenever the mind was about to draw a conclusion or jump to one, when it was about to make a judgement about something, he taught the meditator to recall, ‘maybe not’. Maybe that’s not how it is, maybe that’s not how it happened, maybe that’s not what he or she is really like. Whenever the sense of certainty arose, meditators were to temper it with a gentle ‘maybe not’. Even if they were convinced, they were still to reserve a small space in their mind for the possibility of being wrong: ‘Yes, but maybe – just maybe – not.’ In this way the mind was to become more careful and nuanced in its attitudes.

Luang Por gave this practice the greatest importance: ‘Mai nae is the Buddha himself’, he would say, ‘It is the Dhamma.’ He taught the recol-

lection of ‘mai nae’ both as a means of re-educating a person’s attitude to their life, and also as a specific technique in meditation. As hindrances arose in the course of a sitting, he would encourage the meditator to recognize the hindrance as ‘mai nae’, or ‘changeful’ before returning to the breath. As the mind became more subtle, this accumulated perception of ‘mai nae’ – that whatever arises does not endure – is an exercise of the wisdom faculty that ensures that the mind does not fall into the trap of attaching to joy or to stillness, and is primed to develop *vipassanā*.

When you see impermanence clearly, you become a true monk. Seeing the impermanence, the instability of form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness, the mind does not attach to the five aggregates.

It doesn’t matter what it is – even if something happens that upsets you so much that tears are forming in your eyes – remind yourself, ‘This is *mai nae*.’ Always bear this in mind, with your *sati*, with your alertness. Whether you feel satisfied, dissatisfied, think this is good, this is bad – see it all as ‘*mai nae*’ and you can release the attachment. When you see things as ultimately without value, the letting go occurs automatically. ‘*Mai nae*’ is the object of *vipassanā*.

When something arises, call it ‘*mai nae*’. Don’t forget this word. Don’t let it drop. The Buddha taught us not to grasp on to the good or the bad. Whatever arises, pool your resources in this word. It is the source of wisdom, and the object of *vipassanā*. Make it your constant focus of attention; it will take you beyond doubt ... ‘*mai nae*’ is a tool to uproot attachment to experience. It will enable you to see the Dhamma clearly.

One of the means by which Luang Por sought to inculcate the principle of ‘*mai nae*’ in his disciples’ minds was by maintaining an element of unpredictability in their daily lives. Changes would be introduced to the monastic schedule without prior warning and with no indication of how long they would last. A monk preparing for the annual Rains Retreat at Wat Pah Pong might be told a day or two before it began that he would be doing the retreat elsewhere, that he should gather his things together,

clean up his kuti, and be ready to leave within the hour for a monastery hundreds of kilometres away. It was a style that kept monks on their toes, and it enabled Luang Por to create a singular atmosphere in his monastery, one in which the calming effects of simplicity and repetition were enlivened by a sense that nothing could be taken for granted. Ajahn Jun remembered how plans could change in a single moment:

“He’d say to me, ‘Get your bowl and robes. We’re going to such and such a place.’ By the time I got back again with my things he’d say, ‘Change of plan.’ This happened so often that I got a real feeling for ‘mai nae’ ... Afterwards, I came to understand it to mean dividing things up 50/50, maybe/maybe not. I adopted it as my guiding principle in practice.”

#### POR DEE

‘Por dee’ was another common everyday word that Luang Por’s disciples got to hear a great deal. ‘Por dee’ means ‘just-right’, or ‘just the right amount’. It refers to the optimum amount, neither too much nor too little. If a robe fits well, neither too long nor too short, then it is por dee. For some people, a sitting meditation period of thirty minutes might be por dee; for others, por dee might be an hour or more.

‘Por dee’ was the term that Luang Por used when he wanted to talk about the Middle Way more informally. He said that the ability to tune into the por dee mode for any activity is at the very heart of Dhamma practice. He would often tell the story of Ven. Soṇa who was taught by the Buddha to practice meditation in the same way he had formally played the lute, with strings neither too taut nor too loose\*.

Luang Por taught his disciples to develop a sensitivity to what was por dee in every area of their lives. At the meal time, awareness of por dee meant taking just enough food to fill the stomach, but not so much as to overeat and cause drowsiness or laziness. Por dee in sleeping meant taking enough rest to refresh the body, but not so much as to be indulgent. Everything had to be ‘not too fast, not too slow, not too tight, not too loose.’ He cautioned against the understanding that upholding por dee as a standard implied a bland moderation in all things. Por dee was to

\* AN 6.55

be gauged by the extent to which an action was conducive to the solving of a problem or the attainment of a goal. At certain times and places, a practice might seem to be extreme in the short term, but with regard to overall progress, it might, in fact, be *por dee*. In any endeavour, *por dee* represented the optimum, the most efficient strategy.

But how was a monk to know when his practice was *por dee*? Luang Por would answer this question with a simile:

It is as if you want to row a boat straight across a swiftly flowing river. You don't aim your boat in a straight line. You aim slightly upstream, allowing for the strength of the current to carry you a little downstream, and so, consequently, straight across. In the same way, it is wisest to pitch your practice at a slightly more demanding level than you believe to be '*por dee*' and allow for the strength of defilement to carry you down to the correct level.

I teach you to eat little, sleep little, talk little – everything has to be little! But is that *por dee*? Actually, it's not; it hasn't reached that even consistency, but I teach it to enable you to recognize *por dee*, just-rightness, to see what is appropriate for you ... Rushing too much is not right. Know how to balance different interests until you find the right amount. If there's too little, then add to it. If there's too much, then take some away. This is right practice, or *por dee*.

In the Suttas, the Buddha teaches the Middle Way that avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and empty asceticism. Luang Por liked to expand the meaning of these two extremes to include like and dislike, pleasure and pain. By doing so, he sought to make clear that the teaching was not so much about a general approach to spiritual development, as a moment-by-moment stance towards mental states:

'Just-rightness' means not being drawn into either of the two extremes:

*Kāmasukhaliikānuyoga*: being lost in pleasure and comfort and happiness; indulging in thoughts of being good, excellent, sublime;

*Attakilamathānuyoga*: aversion, suffering, dislike, anger.

These two extremes are not paths that a monastic should follow ... The monastic sees those paths, but he doesn't follow them, he doesn't attach to them. In order to attain peace, he lets go of them, he abandons them.

The ability to maintain practice on this optimum por dee level was dependent on the wisdom faculty, and the perception of changefulness.

The practice becomes por dee when you recognize the impermanence of every mental state that arises and tell your mind that it's 'mai nae'. Patiently endure right there. Don't move onwards from that knowing and don't retreat from it. Persist at that point, and before long you will come to the truth.

Leaders of communities were also to constantly refer to the sense of por dee, whether in implementing monastic regulations or determining a daily schedule. In this context, por dee was to be acknowledged as a temporary balance that would need to be regularly re-calibrated, rather than a standard that once achieved could be sustained long-term. After an initial flurry of enthusiasm, there would be a slow but inexorable slipping of standards until an admonitory discourse from Luang Por would re-establish the standard. Recognizing this pattern, Luang Por would start each new cycle on the strict side of por dee, as a way of retarding the process. Once, when a monk complained that the standard that Luang Por had set was too strict and tight, Luang Por replied:

Tight is good. Before long it will ease off by itself.

## LEARNING FROM NATURE

By founding his monastery in a forest, Luang Por was upholding a venerable tradition stretching back to the time of the Buddha himself. Almost every one of the monasteries established by the Buddha during the forty-five years of his ministry were situated in wooded areas. While the settings for these monasteries varied considerably in wildness – ranging from benign fruit orchards to forbidding jungle thickets and mountain-sides – they all shared certain features in common:

*... being neither too far nor too near a village, suitable for coming and going, accessible for those seeking what is profitable (i.e. Dhamma), not crowded in the day, quiet and still at night, [possessing] an atmosphere of solitude, undisturbed by people, suitable for seclusion.*

*Vin Mv 1.13*

Since the time of the Buddha, monastics with minds liberated from defilement, able to live in any environment without mental suffering, have almost always chosen trees and silence over buildings and noise. It would seem that forests and lonely places are the natural habitat of the arahant. One of the most surprising passages in the Pali Canon is the lyrical verse attributed to Ven. Mahā Kassapa, the great ascetic and probably the gruffest, most forbidding monk in the Suttas:

*Like towering peaks of dark-blue clouds,  
Like splendid edifices are these rocks,  
Where the birds' sweet voices fill the air,  
These rocky heights delight my heart.*

*With glades refreshed by (cooling) rain,  
Resounding with the calls of crested birds,  
The cliffs resorted to by seers,  
These rocky heights delight my heart.*

*Th 1067-68*

In many of his discourses, the Buddha encouraged monks to live in the forest. The vital importance that the Buddha attributed to it may be discerned by his declaration that as long as monks continued to find satisfaction in forest dwellings, the Dhamma-Vinaya would not decline.

The advantages of forest dwelling begin with the physical: in a hot climate, trees provide cool shade that enables monks to practice sitting and walking meditation throughout the day. Secondly, forest dwellings provide physical seclusion from disturbing and stimulating experiences that can disrupt the training.

In the Buddhist understanding, the human relationship to sense experience, mediated by eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, may best be conceived as addiction. The forest monastery in this analogy is akin

to a rehab centre. Just as these institutions are situated far from the surroundings in which the patient's addiction flourishes, so too the forest monastery provides distance from worldly influences. Until the mind is strong, unnecessary exposure to the triggers of addictive behaviour needlessly jeopardize the efforts to free the mind.

Sense pleasures are not condemned as evil. They are, however, considered to have strong effects on the unenlightened mind inimical to higher progress in Dhamma. The world of the senses is seen as drawing the mind outwards in a way that is inherently agitating, while the intoxication that results from sense pleasures and the desire for their continuation and increase, easily overrides moral judgements. The absorbing nature of sense pleasures impedes development of the subtlety of perception regarding internal states that must be sustained for long periods in effective spiritual cultivation. For these reasons, the monastic lives in an environment where the opportunity to enjoy such pleasures is drastically reduced. By simplifying his world, he is able to understand more clearly how it works.

Luang Por would often refer to the three kinds of seclusion (*viveka*) mentioned in the texts. Physical seclusion provides the optimum supporting conditions for mental seclusion, i.e. the state of concentration 'secluded' from the hindrances. This, in turn, creates the basis for the ultimate seclusion from defilements.

The Buddha taught that sound is like a thorn that prevents the mind from entering deep states of meditative calm.\* Forest monasteries provide a respite from the more invasive noises (although in Thailand today, few are completely unaffected by the sounds of road traffic and village loudspeakers).

And yet, Southeast Asian forests are by no means silent places. During the rainy season in particular, they throb with life. The same heat and humidity that humans can find so enervating, seems to swell the exuberance of other creatures. The volume of noises they produce can be considerable. Bird song; the deep '*eung ang! eung ang!*' night-time bellowing of bullfrogs following heavy rain; the gecko lizards '*tuk gae!, tuk gae!*'; the chorus of

\* AN 10.72

cicadas piercing the dusk – these sounds are as familiar to forest monks as traffic noise is to an urban dweller.

Strangely enough, forest noise, even at its most raucous, does not detract from the sense of peace in the monastery. It tends to be the associations evoked by sounds rather than their aural impact that disturbs the meditator. Luang Por once joked that whereas a newly ordained monk could hear birds singing at the tops of their voices in a tree outside his kuti and hardly notice it, the faintest sound of a female singer, wafting into the forest from a village loudspeaker, could turn his mind upside down.

Monks intent on the path of practice have always been drawn to forests because secluded environments support the development of sense-restraint, fewness of wishes, contentment, love of solitude and introspection – the core virtues of a monastic vocation. Living in nature demands care and respect for one's surroundings and a patient acceptance of a world over which one has only limited control. While the man-made rhythms of urban life are busy, purposeful and stressful, the rhythms of nature are cyclical and timeless, exerting a steady calming effect on the mind. But perhaps the greatest advantage in living in the forest is that the monastic is surrounded by natural processes demonstrating at all times the nature of arising, growth, decay and disappearance. Internal investigation of these qualities is much enhanced when they are being revealed in the external world.

Luang Por encouraged his disciples to wake up to the simple truths that surrounded them:

Nature is full of teachings for all of us. A wise person learns from the things around him in the forest: the earth, the rocks, the trees, the creepers. It's as if all these things are ready and willing to give us advice and teachings ... When we consider it well, we'll see that forms, etc. are only our enemies because we still lack wisdom. In fact, they are excellent teachers.

He drew an analogy with his attempts to feed the forest chickens when he first came to live at Wat Pah Pong. After checking for danger again and again, these wary, suspicious creatures eventually discovered that the rice he scattered on the ground for them was, in fact, safe. Thus, they came

to see that something that they had originally viewed with great mistrust was of great advantage to them. In the same way, he said the wise came to see that sense objects that had formerly been perceived by them as being dangerous to their practice, had only seemed so because of ‘wrong thinking, wrong view, wrong consideration’. In fact, sense objects gave useful knowledge and the means by which to realize liberation.

Living in the forest was beneficial in many ways to Dhamma practice, but it was not to be attached to. Monks were to be wary of allowing themselves to be content with the merely superficial peace of mind that they experienced through living in an environment secluded from disturbing, distracting sense objects. They should constantly remind themselves that it was a means to an end:

We don't retreat from forms, sounds, odours, flavours, physical sensations and mental objects as an admission of defeat, but in order to train ourselves, to nurture our wisdom.

Liberation didn't lie in escaping from the world of sense objects but in transforming the experience of them through wisdom.

One year, Luang Por sent an Australian monk, Ajahn Jagaro, to spend the Rains Retreat in a branch monastery more than 150 kilometres away from Wat Pah Pong. During the retreat, Luang Por paid a visit.

*Luang Por:* How are you getting on, Jagaro? Why are you so thin?

*Ajahn Jagaro:* I'm suffering, Luang Por. I don't feel so good.

*Luang Por:* What are you suffering about? Why are you unhappy?

*Ajahn Jagaro:* It's because I'm living so far from my teacher.

*Luang Por:* What do you mean? You're living with six Ajahns, isn't that enough for you?

[A look of puzzlement.]

*Luang Por:* Ajahn Eyes, Ajahn Ears, Ajahn Nose, Ajahn Tongue, Ajahn Body and Ajahn Mind. These are your teachers. Listen to them well, watch them well and you'll become wise.

Observing the creatures that shared the forest with the Sangha could also be a cause of insight – even if, as was the case at Wat Pah Pong, there were few larger animals to be seen. By the mid-1950s, most of the large wild animals indigenous to Northeast Thailand such as tigers, wild boar and elephants had disappeared from the rural areas of Ubon, remaining only in the more remote mountainous areas on the Lao and Cambodian borders. In Pah Pong, situated relatively close to a number of long-established villages, only smaller creatures survived: wild chickens, squirrels and chipmunks, flying foxes, flying lemurs, tortoises, snakes, civet cats, mouse deer and various kinds of birds. Over the years, Luang Por did everything he could to encourage local people to give up hunting. But although he achieved some notable successes, any overall decline in hunting was probably due as much to the decimation of the hunted as it was to an increased restraint on the part of the hunters.

Regardless of what was going on outside its gates, Luang Por was at least able to maintain the monastery as a refuge for vulnerable creatures. On the large sign at the monastery gate, it was prominently declared that the monastery was a sanctuary, a '*khet abhaytan*', literally an area in which the gift of freedom from fear is extended to all beings.

Often, forest creatures would form the subjects of homilies delivered to the Sangha, none more so than the forest chickens:

Look at how spry the forest chickens are, how wary of danger they are! And they're no gluttons: the moment they become conscious of a threat – even while they're eating – they're away! These forest chickens are vigilant, they protect themselves. And they can fly high. When they sleep, they rest on tree branches and tree tops, each one to himself.

Not like domestic chickens. They eat a lot; they're heavy; they're ponderous. They can't fly high. They don't have their wits about them. Even if one manages to run off, it soon gets mauled by dogs. Domestic chickens get attention from human beings, they're looked after – and it makes them heedless.

The forest chickens are different; they're alert and self-reliant. They go about their business without any fuss. They're punctual:

come rain or shine – even if it's bitterly cold – when it's time to crow, they crow. In fact, they're so reliable we use them as an alarm clock. They're consistent about their work, and they never demand any reward from anyone for doing it. They live at ease in nature. They don't seem to get attached to anything; it's almost as if they have their own kind of Dhamma practice. They don't think a lot, they're not inquisitive or doubtful; they don't look for things to stir up their minds.

## WORKING WITH SENSUALITY

*Monks, I see nothing that can disturb the mind of a man as much as the form, sound, etc. of a woman.*

*Monks, I see nothing that can disturb the mind of a woman as much as the form, sound, etc. of a man.*

AN 1.1-10

*Have I not described in many ways the abandoning of sensual desires, the full understanding of perceptions of sensual desires, the curing of thirst for sensual desires, the eradication of thoughts of sensual desires, the allaying of the fever of sensual desires?*

Vin Pr 1

*Monks, if a sensual thought, a thought of ill-will, or a thought of harming arises in a monk while walking (standing, sitting, lying down), and he tolerates it, does not abandon it, dispel it, terminate it, and obliterate it, then that monk is said to be devoid of ardour and wise fear of consequences; he is constantly and continuously lazy and lacking in energy while walking (standing, sitting, lying down).*

AN 4.11

The first expulsion offense of the Vinaya states that a monk who commits an act of sexual intercourse immediately forfeits his monkhood. Although this is the most important of the Vinaya rules governing the expression of sexual desire, it is by no means the only one. Masturbation, lewd speech and making lustful contact with a woman's body, for example, constitute

major breaches of the Vinaya (*sanghādisesa*), requiring periods of penance and rehabilitation. Other rules require monks to avoid being alone with a woman or conducting a conversation with a woman without another male present.

The strictness and comprehensiveness of these rules point to some of the central tenets of Buddhist monasticism, namely: that sexual desire is amongst the greatest obstacles to the highest spiritual attainments; that initially, the expression of sexual desire may be skilfully restrained through mindfulness of precepts; that sexual desire itself can, and should, be attenuated and eventually eliminated through practice of the Eightfold Path; that, as sexual desire is rooted in identification with the body and mind, liberation from that identification inevitably entails cessation of sexual desire; that an enlightened being is free from all sexual thoughts and perceptions.

Luang Por's exhortations on the topic of sensuality were usually blunt in tone but spiced with humour – sometimes he would warn monks of the dangers of letting cobras spread their hoods or, worst of all, allowing them to spit. Sexual feelings arose naturally in the untrained mind, he said, as they were a part of nature, but it was a part that monks must refuse to indulge. Giving harbour to sexual thoughts and fantasies was one of the most foolish errors that a monk could commit. A vicious circle would be created. The more the monk indulged in sexual thoughts, the more his meditation would suffer. The more his meditation suffered, the less able he would be to protect his mind from indulging in sexual thoughts. A serious transgression against the Vinaya or disrobing would most likely follow.

If you still enjoy the form or the odour of a woman, you're still dwelling in the sensual realm; you still haven't managed to let go of sense objects. You're monks in name only.

The threefold training provided the basis for dealing with sensuality. Firstly, commitment to the Vinaya, bolstered by wise shame and wise fear of consequences, was to be used to guard against the *kamma* created by lustful actions and speech. Secondly, patiently enduring of sexual feelings was to support mindfulness in preventing the rapid proliferation

of sensual thoughts that tends to follow from an initial perception; at the same time, meditation was to provide a clearly superior solution to the human need for pleasure. Thirdly, wise reflection was to be developed in order to undo the false perceptions upon which lust thrived.

The importance of wise reflection was vital: lust could only be sustained by restricting attention to those parts of the body that encourage it, and by disregarding those that engender indifference or disgust. Even those parts of the physical body that do provoke lust are only able to do so when they are looked at in a certain way, and when certain information or perspectives are ignored. By opening the mind to all those aspects of the body that the lustful mind represses, lust is deprived of its foundation.

The loathsome aspects of monks' own male bodies were more easily seen. As they practised constantly observing their bodies with an equanimous mind, they could not help but be confronted with the unattractiveness of such phenomena as sweat, phlegm, urine, excrement, etc. But the recognition that women's bodies were every bit as coarse and full of unattractive parts as a man's, was harder to accept. Luang Por's words, intended to disabuse monks of such a coarse mental state as lust, were correspondingly earthy. On one occasion, he spoke to an infatuated disciple:

Look more closely. Delusion arises in your mind when you don't meditate. Are you going to let yourself be fooled by the beauty of skin? Consider what's underneath it. Have you really thought about that? What's got into your mind that you won't let it pull free of these desires? They're causing you suffering!

Do you want to go back to jail again? Are you in love with her waste holes? There's two holes, and they're waste holes. If they're not washed they stink. Or don't you believe me?

Mucus runs out of these holes. You don't even realize that you're infatuated with a waste hole. She's full of waste holes. Her face is full of them. It's crazy to be attached to all that and yet you're ready for more. You still want to go back and die in the same old place. Haven't you had enough?

Sensual desire doomed them to rebirth. And just one nine-month term of imprisonment in a woman's womb should be more than enough to make somebody not want to go through it again. But, incredibly:

You've passed through these filthy things countless times before, and you still feel no compunction.

Comparisons involving disgusting holes or sewage pipes were Luang Por's forte, but when speaking of sensual desire itself, rather than its object, his similes were more wide-ranging. He pointed out that the pleasure was short-lived and was usually followed by some discomfort. As soon as you've dealt with the discomfort, then you want more.

Referring to his own practice, he once said:

Once I'd become a monk, I became afraid of it all. I saw more suffering in sensual pleasures than enjoyment. It was as if there was this nice sweet banana. You knew it was sweet, but now you'd found out that the banana had been poisoned. Even though you were aware of the sweetness, you also knew that if you ate it, you'd die. That was the view that was in my mind all the time. I was constantly aware of the poison, and so I drew back more and more. Now, after many years as a monk, it doesn't look even slightly appetizing.

As for extreme cases in which no amount of meditation could reduce the mental agitation, Luang Por had a piece of advice guaranteed to send a shiver down a young monk's spine:

Give it a good whack with an axe handle. Then see if dares lift its head again.

But the word '*kāma*', or sensual desire, has a wide-ranging meaning. It is not solely confined to sexual desire.

When people become monks they often say how happy they are to have left the sensual world behind them. But look more closely at the nature of sensual indulgence. If feelings of like and dislike arise when you see a form with your eyes, then you are still

indulging in sensuality. Any unmindful contact through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body or mind, is sensory indulgence.

Another analogy to point out the drawbacks of sensuality returned to the world of dogs:

Practice is tough. The teacher instructs you to fit into the monastic form but it's hard – you're already attached to the flavour of sensuality. Like dogs. If all you give a dog to eat every day is plain rice, it may still eat so much it gets as fat as a pig. But if one day you tip some curry over the rice – two plates are all you need – then after that the dog will refuse plain rice. That's how fast attachment takes hold. Unless we reflect on our use of the four requisites, then forms, sounds, odours and flavours can destroy our practice.

It was not that monks were to keep silent all the time. Developing Right Speech is an essential element of the Eightfold Path, and nourishing and supportive relationships with fellow monks would be impossible without it. Nevertheless, Luang Por urged monks to observe how often seeking out conversation with friends was little more than an attempt to escape from themselves. But habits were strong, and it was not always so easy to draw the line between appropriate and inappropriate speech. So there would be a stern Dhamma talk, a period of strictness and then gradually the trivial conversations would start to spring up once more, until the next talk damped them down again. Luang Por never seemed to expect it to be any other way. But he did consider that a clear standard and ideal that monks found difficult to live up to was better than no standard at all. At the very least, the standard honoured the monks who were inclined to keep themselves somewhat aloof. And it was obvious to everyone that there was a correlation between the avoidance of socializing and devotion to meditation.

A favourite location for idle conversation was the shed where the monks washed and dyed their robes. To prevent this, Luang Por instructed the monks to either practice walking meditation or make toothwoods while they waited for their robes to dry. Luang Por's kuti was not too far from

the dyeing shed and if the sound of conversation reached him, he would walk over to admonish the culprits:

You've let the dogs bite you again.

## TUDONG

'*Tudong*', the Thai form of the Pali word 'dhutaṅga', refers to the ascetic practices allowed by the Buddha. In Thailand, the word is most often heard in the phrase '*pai tudong*' or to 'go on tudong'. Going on tudong is the practice by which monks walk through the countryside and in lonely places, either as a form of pilgrimage, or to find secluded spots for meditation. Monks on tudong keep many of the traditional ascetic practices, thus the adoption of that name rather than the more accurate '*jarik*' (Pali: '*cārika*'). Going on tudong is one of the key practices of the forest monk, and one on which Luang Por gave a great deal of advice:

The Buddha praised going on tudong as proclaiming the Holy Life. The 'Holy Life' means the refined training practices, the inner practices. It's not that the walking or the journey itself is tudong. The real meaning of 'tudong' are the practices undertaken on that journey.

He explained further:

We go on tudong in order to experience physical solitude. When we come to cremation forests or quiet mountain valleys, then we stop to meditate. When we gain the seclusion of physical solitude, it forms a cause for mental seclusion, and the mind becomes lucidly calm.

Two virtues he stressed as all-important for the tudong monk were wise shame and wise fear of the consequences of one's actions. He said that in possession of these two qualities, 'wherever a monk may go on tudong, his mind will be bright.'

When you go to visit different teachers, don't start comparing different monasteries – take whatever is good from each one. Don't worry that you will need all kinds of things and then take a great load of requisites. Once you start walking, you'll see your

mistake and end up having to give it all away. Tudong is preparing your mind for practice. Soap isn't essential; you can rub yourself down with a piece of cloth. It's not necessary to take a toothbrush; a piece of wood (mai khat) will do. A bathing cloth and a dipper is all you need for a bath. You can survive like that. That's the way of tudong.

By the mid-1960s, Luang Por considered the tradition to be in decline. The great respect afforded to tudong monks by lay Buddhists had led unscrupulous monks to take advantage of it by masquerading as ascetics in order to garner donations. Scathing about the corruption of the tudong tradition that he saw around him, Luang Por would refer to the tudong ideals that he had inherited:

Even if there were vehicles, you didn't make use of them. You relied on your mindfulness and wisdom. You travelled with physical pain, you looked at the painful feelings. You went contemplating your mind. You went for coolness, for practice, to search, to look for Dhamma and peace. You went into the mountains and forests looking for truth.

Every now and again, Luang Por would lead small groups of monks and lay attendants on tudong expeditions. These trips, usually to the more remote areas of Ubon Province bordering Laos or Cambodia, might last as long as two or three months. They gave Luang Por the opportunity to see his disciples at close quarters dealing with adversity. He would use their daily experiences as a teaching device. A lump of human excrement by the side of the road could lead to a reflection on the human body; emerging mushrooms and dead tree stumps prompted homilies on the impermanent nature of things.

As Luang Por got older and was unable to lead the monks on tudong himself, he would instead occasionally send groups of three or four monks to stay in cremation forests outside local villages. The cremation of those who had died an unnatural death (and whose confused and unhappy spirit was believed to be roaming around) was a favourite occasion for this practice. Luang Por pushed his disciples to confront their fear of spirits, as he himself had done many years before.

Monks given permission by Luang Por to embark on a tudong trip would first ask for his blessings and guidance. Ajahn Jun went on many such walks and remembered much of the advice he received. He recalled that Luang Por would encourage tudong monks to keep returning to the three refuges of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. They should humbly invite the qualities of clear knowing, truth and good practice into their hearts. With Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha dwelling within them, they would be joyful, energetic and mindful, and develop a wisdom that could deal effectively with any problem that might arise. Going on tudong meant testing themselves against all kinds of obstacles. Those obstacles were not to be feared or resented. It was through facing up to them that they would come to understand the truth of things.

Luang Por gave detailed instructions on how to minimize the dangers from human and non-human beings. He suggested that in areas populated by wild animals such as tigers and elephants, it would be better to avoid eating meat, as the subtle odour emitted from the body after meat eating could provoke attack. If a monk did come face-to-face with a wild creature, he should simply keep still, and in most cases, the creature would simply go its way. If it did not, then evasive measures would have to be taken. Ajahn Jun took to heart Luang Por's advice on how to deal with dangerous animals.

"He said if an animal – say a wild bull – means to harm you, then it will usually lower its head, but it can't get very low. So, if you can't get away, then duck down below its horns and away to one side. Or try opening your *glot*. If the animal is startled by that, it will run away. If there's a ditch nearby, then go down into it; the bull will be unable to gore you properly down there. When bulls are about to butt, they shut their eyes. If your mind is really firm, then stand your ground and as it runs in, then at the last moment, move away at a slight angle. But you might not be quick enough; it depends on your strength of mind and agility."

Luang Por also explained the protocols for staying in caves. Those in which monks with bad *sīla* had stayed in the past should be avoided. The monk should make clear his pure intentions before entering, as described by Ajahn Jun:

“Luang Por said that if there were fierce animals or local spirits or guardian deities in the area, then when you arrived, you should stand at the entrance and make a resolution, ‘I am about to enter this cave. I come as a friend, in order to help you be free of suffering, not as an enemy to do you harm.’ You should establish your intentions in that way, and put any animals or other beings inside at their ease. ‘There’s no need to doubt or be suspicious of me. I’ve come here to put forth effort in my meditation, to do good. If you wish to continue living here and share the cave with me, then please do as you wish.’ Having first made that determination, he said, you should then enter the cave purposefully and with mindfulness.”

The greatest protection was always morality.

“He said that the most important thing was not to break my precepts, because if I did, something untoward would happen ... Morality is very important, and you must try to look after it with every breath, every step of the way. If you break your precepts, all kinds of unpleasant things can happen to you: sometimes it might be stomach ache; sometimes you might rave deliriously in your sleep, have nightmares; sometimes it might be animals or spirits coming to harm you. So keep reflecting on your morality.

“Luang Por said that going by yourself can be lonely; going with a friend is good. Two is a good number. But if three or four go together, it’s too much, and it often leads to complications and turmoil ... He cautioned me about conflicts with fellow monks and advised me to be patient. If you go with a group of five monks for more than a month or two, there’s usually only one or two left by the end. The combination of tiredness and harsh surroundings gives rise to arguments about things like the route or the place to rest. Some monks can be forgetful; they leave things behind and have to go back for them, which annoys their friends. There are many problems, particularly with shortages of requisites. To go on tudong you need a great deal of patience and endurance.

“He said that if more than one monk goes to stay in a cremation forest, you should stay well apart – although, if Luang Por himself was one of the group, he would cough every now and again just to encourage you. He always stressed that we shouldn’t be hesitant about the practice. It was

correct, it was right ... Don't be fearful about breaking a leg or crippling yourself. There's no need to fear death."

Monks would often visit forest monasteries during their tudong walk.

"Luang Por cautioned us that it was important when entering into the company of other groups of monks not to be conceited or attach to conventions."

The main criterion for choosing places to stay on tudong was seclusion. After a few days in one spot, lay people would often start to come to visit, and the advantages to meditation would be lost.

"You may start getting offered good food. The place is beautiful and it's comfortable, and you can get attached to these things. That's why it's good to move on after three days, or seven days at most. You don't go on tudong for comfort and pleasure and good food. You go for the benefit to your practice. Don't stay long enough to give rise to a sense of loss when you leave ... If you stay longer, attachments to laypeople can arise."

Tudong was to wear away the defilements, not to accumulate new ones. Monks should constantly be monitoring their feelings towards their surroundings.

"If you're somewhere and you don't like it and suddenly you have to leave today – right now! – or if you like it and you want to stay for a long time, then it means that you're following craving and desire.

"Luang Por told us that we shouldn't go sightseeing. He told us to look at the inner sights instead. He said, You don't need to go and visit a lot of teachers. Go and stay in cremation forests. Maintain your practice of chanting and bowing in such places. Be restrained and don't stay anywhere for long, or you will form attachments to the laypeople.

"He said that if you speak to laypeople, you should take into account their level of understanding. Don't be contentious or aggressive. He warned us about people coming to ask for lottery numbers. He said, 'Tell them you don't know, and that you'll give them something better – the principles of practice. If they pester you and you can't get away from them, then teach about practice, the Five and Eight Precepts, and let them come up

with the numbers themselves.' Examine people's characters; they may be dangerous to you. But on the other hand, they may have previously looked after monks. Then they will come and attend to you. At night time they will bring their families to take the precepts, and on Observance Day, they will come to take the Eight Precepts.

"He gave advice on how to deal with questions that might get asked ... He said that if people come and ask you about levels of absorption and enlightenment, then tell them that you're not interested in that way of talking. Our way of practice comes down to whether you can abandon greed, hatred and delusion. Are you grasping at material things? If someone abuses you, do you get angry? As for different absorptions, our teachers don't use those terms; they teach you to watch your mind, and by doing so, to free yourself from *Māra*'s snare."

Luang Por said that monks on tudong could spread the Dhamma through the quality of their sense restraint. Sometimes, their deportment could so inspire those who saw them that it might lead them to request teachings.

"He told the story of how Ven. Sāriputta, while still the member of another sect, saw the arahant Ven. Assaji on his alms-round. The colour of Ven. Assaji's robe was sober. He seemed much more composed in his movements than members of other sects. He walked peacefully, neither too fast nor too slow, but alert to his every movement and the environment he was walking through. Ven. Sāriputta became inspired and approached him. As a result of the short teaching he received from Ven. Assaji, Ven. Sāriputta realized stream-entry and subsequently became one of the two great disciples ...

"Luang Por said that on tudong you see things you've never seen before, hear things you've never heard before, and get to know things you never knew before. With wisdom and self-restraint, every experience on tudong could be beneficial, both to yourself and others."

## MEDICINES

Tudong monks like to seek out secluded places to practise, but places that are far from the hustle and bustle of the world are also far from modern conveniences, and most crucially, they may be hours from the nearest

hospital. Thus, it is important for tudong monks to have a knowledge of herbal medicines so as to be able to make use of the things nature gives freely to treat their illnesses. In a memoir, Ajahn Dilok wrote:

“Luang Por once told the Sangha that before going on tudong, he would finely pound *somlom* leaves together with salt and then pack the mixture tightly into a length of bamboo and roast it, which would leave a dried stick within the bamboo. When he wanted to eat some, he’d dig it out of the tube with a knife. He said that if you have no tonic to drink in the afternoon, then you can eat a little of this instead. For malaria, he recommended eating neem leaves and about six inches of borapet vine a day as a prophylactic. If you have malaria badly, then you should pound the borapet, extract the sap and drink it. Some people like to cut borapet into little rings and lightly roast them with salt. Its aroma is as good as coffee. Luang Por said he got a lot of his remedies, especially those for snake bites, from his brother Por Lah.

“Another medicine that tudong monks have used successfully to cure snake bite is the one allowed by the Buddha in the Vinaya. In the event of a snake bite, you are allowed to cut living wood, burn it and mix the wood ash with urine and excrement; and having strained it, give it to the bitten person. It causes violent vomiting and can eliminate the poison.

“There was an army colonel who heard Luang Por mention this a number of times and it stuck in his memory. One day he took a group of soldiers on patrol in the jungle and one of them got bitten by a snake. The colonel remembered Luang Por’s words. He asked for donations of excrement and urine. They were mixed together and forced down the man’s throat. At that point, his jaw was already stiff. He went cold and then started to vomit. He survived.”

The idea of drinking urine might seem repulsive, but in India, its medicinal value has been recognized since ancient times, and the Buddha allowed the consumption of cow urine for medicinal purposes. The older generation of Isan tudong monks (the younger generation are generally not so keen), pickled human urine. They would bury earthenware jars of urine, ginger, lemongrass, galangal and kaffir lime peel – sometimes diluted with water, sometimes not – for months or even years. Then they

would filter and boil it with fresh ginger and salt. The resultant brew was considered an excellent remedy for digestive problems.

## THE MONK

Luang Por spent some thirty years training monastics. It was the main work of his life. He experienced successes and failures, and he learned from both. The standard of practice he established and the goals he set for his disciples were expressed most beautifully by the Buddha himself in the Dhammapada:

*For the wise monk,  
These are the first things to cultivate:  
Sense-control, contentment,  
Observance of the Pātimokkha rules,  
Association with keen friends,  
Who lead a pure life.*

Dhp 375-376

*Just as the jasmine sheds,  
Its own withered flower,  
So should you, O monk,  
Cast off lust and hatred.*

Dhp 377

*By yourself censure yourself.  
By yourself examine yourself.  
Thus self-guarded and mindful too,  
Shall you, monk, live in bliss.*

Dhp 379

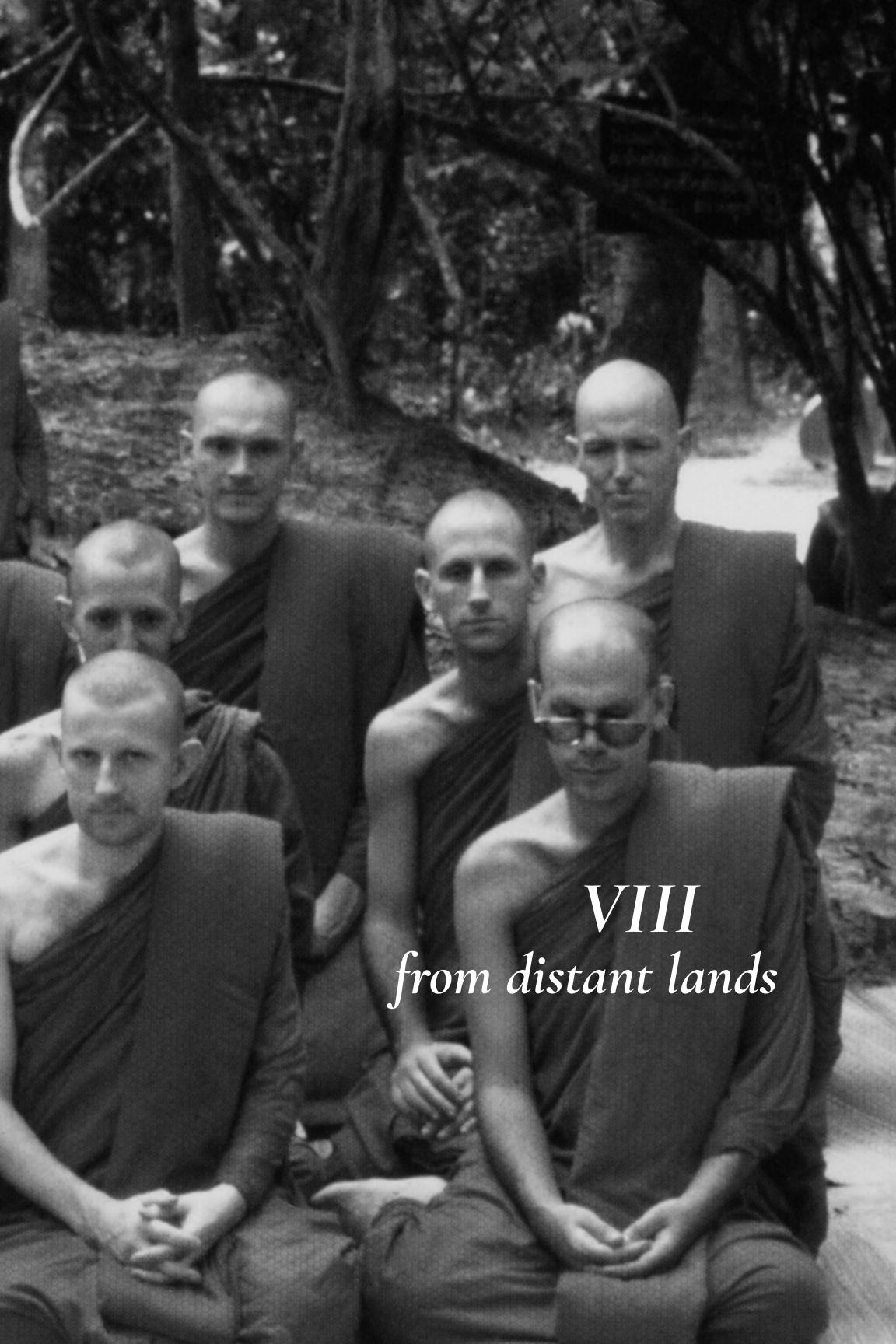
*Dwelling in the Dhamma,  
Delighting in the Dhamma,  
Investigating the Dhamma,  
Remembering the Dhamma,  
That monk falls not away  
From the Dhamma sublime.*

Dhp 364

*He who grasps at neither 'I' nor 'Mine',  
Neither in mentality nor materiality,  
Who grieves not for what is not -  
Such a one indeed is called a monk.*

Dhp 367





VIII  
*from distant lands*

*If by renouncing a lesser happiness one may realize a greater happiness, let the wise renounce the lesser, having regard for the greater.*

*Dhp 290*

# *From Distant Lands*

*Luang Por and the Western Sangha*<sup>\*</sup>

## I. INTRODUCTION

### FARANG

From the mid-fourteenth century until its sack by the Burmese in 1767, Ayutthaya was the capital of the Thai nation. Established on an island in the Chao Phraya River, it was ideally situated to act as an entrepôt port at a time when land routes were safer than sea, and merchants in the Orient sought to avoid sending their goods through the Straits of Malacca. Within two hundred years, Ayutthaya had become one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Asia. Its population of approximately a million people exceeded that of London. Some five hundred temples, many with pagodas covered in gold leaf, lent the city a magical, heaven-like aura that dazzled visitors from other lands. By the mid-seventeenth century, with communities of traders from France, Holland, Portugal and England housed outside the city wall, the inhabitants of Ayutthaya had become accustomed to Westerners or ‘farangs’. The kings of Ayutthaya often employed foreign mercenaries as bodyguards. To the Thais, these

\* Strictly speaking, it would be more accurate to use the word ‘non-Thai’ or ‘foreign’ here. A small number of Asian monks, mainly Japanese and Chinese, trained at Wat Pah Pong. However, the vast majority of the foreign monks have been from the West, and the Thai word used to refer to the non-Thais, ‘farang’, is one specifically coined for Caucasians. For these reasons and for ease of usage, I have chosen to use the word ‘Western Sangha’.

strange white beings seemed to resemble a species of ogre: hairy, ill-smelling, quarrelsome and coarse, lovers of meat and strong spirits, but possessors of admirable technical skills, particularly in the arts of war.

The ogres had a religion – priests and monks accompanied them – but it did not appeal to the Thais who were content with their own traditions. As Buddhists, they were accustomed to equating spirituality with the renunciation of sensual pleasures. They found the Western clergy worldly and hypocritical, undignified in their rivalries. The Ayutthayan Thais gently rebuffed what they saw as an alien faith with politeness and smiles. However, the legendary Siamese tolerance was stretched to the limit during the reign of King Narai (1656-88), when a charismatic Greek adventurer, Constantine Phaulkon, rose to become the closest adviser to the King, who appointed him *Mahatthai*, minister for trade and foreign affairs, second in power and influence to the king himself. After his conversion to Catholicism, it is alleged that Phaulkon became involved with the French in plots to put a Christian prince on the throne and thus win the whole country for God and Louis XIV. At King Narai's death in 1688, however, conservative forces prevailed, French hopes were dashed and Phaulkon was executed. For the next 150 years, the Siamese looked on Westerners with fear, aversion and suspicion.

But as French and British power and prestige spread throughout the region in the nineteenth century, the image of the Westerner changed. He came to represent authority and modernity – the new world order that had to be accommodated. As all the rest of the region fell into European hands, Siam's independence became increasingly fragile. King Mongkut (1851-68), believed that the only way for a small country to survive in the colonial era was by earning the respect of the Western powers through becoming more like them. To that end, he began to reverse policies of previous monarchs and cultivated friendships with Western scholars and missionaries. He introduced Western styles of dress and uniform. He predicted eclipses by scientific means, undermining the hitherto unshakeable prestige of the astrologers. He also sought to reform popular Buddhism along more rational, 'scientific' lines to protect it from the missionaries' disdain.

After King Mongkut's death, his son, King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), carried on his father's policies and sought to create a modern, centralized state and administration, relying heavily on Western expertise. Members of the royal family and aristocracy were sent to study in the West, particularly to England. The policy was successful: Siam preserved its independence. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, the French humiliated the Thais by annexing their eastern territories. To many, this confirmed the West's unquestionable superiority in all things worldly.

By the time Luang Por reached manhood, the wealthy Thai elite had become enamoured with the material symbols of Western culture. Expensive imported clothes, motor vehicles, gadgets and foods were the sought-after status symbols. The absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932 in favour of a Western style democracy, that was soon displaced by a more potent import: military dictatorship. Fascism was the new vogue – far more appealing to the military men running the country than the messiness of political debate. The country's name was changed to 'Thailand'. Chauvinism was promoted in the guise of patriotism. Cultural mandates accompanied political change. Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram passed laws making it compulsory for men to wear hats and kiss their wives on the cheek before leaving for work in the morning. A marginalization of Buddhist goals and ideals, coinciding with official support for Buddhist forms and rituals, became a feature of development that was to become an enduring trait.

In the hamlets of Ubon, images of the West came from Hollywood. Travelling movie companies set up their screens and loud speakers in village monasteries where Clark Gable and Greta Garbo enchanted their audiences in homely Lao, dubbed live in front of the screen. Thus, the first flesh-and-blood glimpse of farang in Ubon, exciting though it was, came as a shock. During the Second World War, while the newly ordained Luang Por was studying in local village monasteries, a group of gaunt and ragged POWs was jailed in the centre of town. They were prisoners of the local Japanese garrison, hostages against Allied bombing raids. The local people smuggled them bananas.

Then, in the 1960s, came the Vietnam War. Ubon, closer to Hanoi than to Bangkok, attained a strategic importance. By the end of the decade,

twenty thousand young Americans were stationed on a sprawling airbase north of the town. Large uniformed men – black, brown and white – strode along the streets hand-in-hand with mini-skirted prostitutes. They caroused in tacky nightclubs with names like ‘Playboy’ and sought to escape the stress of their lives with ‘Buddha sticks’. Overhead, at regular intervals, came the deafening sound of Phantom fighters and A130 airships taking off on missions over Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

American military personnel were not, however, the only young Westerners in Thailand at that time. It was during this period that villagers working in the fields to the east of Wat Pah Pong became used to a strange new sight. Tall, fair-skinned young men with scruffy hair and dressed in tee shirts and faded blue jeans would often be seen walking along the ox-track with a dogged, loping stride and with a large grubby backpack, like a malignant growth, behind them. These young men were the first trickles of the steady stream of Westerners who were finding their way to Luang Por Chah. They were to become the senior members of a Western Sangha which now, more than forty years later, numbers almost two hundred monks and nuns.

#### MORE THAN WORDS

‘Luang Por, only a few of your Western disciples speak Thai and you can’t speak their language. How do you teach them?’ This was one of the most common questions that Luang Por faced from the early 1970s onwards as the number of his Western disciples steadily increased. He would explain that he was teaching Buddhism not as a philosophy, but as a way of liberation. Pointing directly to the experience of suffering, its cause, and the way leading to its cessation were more important than finding words to describe the process. Sometimes to clarify this point, he would pour water from the thermos flask on the table before him into a cup.

In Thai we call this ‘*nam ron*’, in Lao it’s ‘*nam hon*’ and in English they call it ‘hot water’. But these are just names. Dip your finger in it, and no language can really pass on what that actually feels like. Even so, people of every nationality know the feeling for themselves.

On another occasion, a visitor seeing all the foreign monks, asked Luang Por whether he spoke English or French or German or Japanese, to which, in every case, he replied that no, he could not. The questioner looked confused: how did the foreign monks learn anything then? Characteristically, Luang Por replied with a question:

Do you keep any animals at home? Have you got any cats and dogs? Any oxen or buffalo? Yes? Well, can you speak Cat language? Can you speak Dog? Can you speak Buffalo? No? Then how do they know what you want them to do?

He summarized:

It's not difficult. Training the Westerners is like training water buffalo. If you just keep tugging the rope, they soon catch on.

To Thais, the water buffalo is the epitome of dullness and stupidity. Comparing a human being to a buffalo would normally be considered offensive; anyone who calls someone '*khwai*' to their face is either showing contempt or is spoiling for a fight. Given the exaggerated respect for the intelligence of Westerners common in Thailand, Luang Por's audiences would always find his buffalo comparison both shocking and hilarious.

The sight of Western monks made a powerful impression. At a time when Western technology, material advances and expertise were being so touted by the powers-that-be, here were to be found educated young men who had voluntarily renounced the good things of life that people were being encouraged to aspire to. These were men who had chosen to live austere lives in the forest as monks – not understanding the language, eating coarse food, striving for peace and wisdom in the same way that Thai monks had been doing for hundreds of years. It was baffling, fascinating, and, above all else, inspiring. Many visitors would leave Wat Pah Pong thinking that perhaps there was more to Buddhism than they had supposed. If the Westerners had so much faith in it, how could it be outdated?

Luang Por's basic technique was not, he insisted, particularly mysterious: he led his Western disciples, he showed them what to do, he was an example. It wasn't necessary to impart a great deal of information.

Even though I have a lot of Western disciples living with me, I don't give them so much formal instruction. I lead them in the practice. Good actions yield good results and bad actions yield bad results. I give them the opportunity to see that. When they practise sincerely, they get good results, and so they develop conviction in what they're doing. They don't just come here to read books. They really do the practice. They abandon whatever is bad in their hearts and goodness appears in its place.

The Westerners had come to Buddhist teachings and monastic life without the cultural conditioning of the Thais. In one sense, they had 'beginner's mind'. Luang Por found their open, questioning attitude refreshing and stimulating. As students, they were largely free of the complacency that he considered such an obstacle for his Thai disciples. On the other hand, their need for explanations could make them susceptible to crippling doubts. Sometimes, questions led only to more and more questions, diminishing the intensity of their practice. The Westerners often came to envy the single-minded application of their fellow Thai monks, who seemed blessed with unquestioning faith in the teacher and the tradition.

Luang Por said:

Once you've got them to stop, these Westerners can see clearly how they've done it. But in the beginning, it's a bit wearing on the teacher. Wherever they are, whoever they're with, they ask questions all the time. Well, if they don't know the answers, then why not? They have to keep asking until they run out of questions, until there's nothing more to ask. Otherwise, they'd just keep running – they're hot!

## II. THE FIRST DISCIPLE

AJAHN SUMEDHO

In 1967, a Wat Pah Pong monk named Ven. Sommai returned from a tudong trip to northern Isan with a monk who literally stood head and shoulders above him. Even the most restrained monks in Wat Pah Pong were unable to resist at least a surreptitious glance. The new monk was

six foot two inches tall, had a fair complexion, an angular nose and bright blue eyes. His name was Sumedho.

The two monks had met in a meditation monastery in Nong Khai Province. Upon discovering that they were both Korean War veterans and that Ven. Sommai spoke English, they had exchanged their stories. Ajahn Sumedho told Sommai how, after the war, he had returned to college and gained a master's degree in South Asian Studies from Berkeley. Upon graduation, he had joined the Peace Corps and taught English in Borneo before moving on to a spell at Thammasat University in Bangkok. He said that it was after receiving meditation instruction at the nearby Wat Mahathat that his interest in Buddhism, first kindled by his readings of Japanese haiku poetry during his military service some ten years before, had ripened into the decision to become a monk.

Now, however, after moving to Isan, receiving full Ordination, and spending the last several months in a small hut on solitary retreat, Ajahn Sumedho was beginning to lose confidence in the form of his monastic life and feeling the need for a more rounded way of practice. Ven. Sommai's descriptions of Wat Pah Pong were timely, and inspired him. He asked permission from his preceptor to leave, and before long, the two monks were setting off together to walk the 450 kilometres south to Ubon.

It would turn out to be a decision with far-reaching consequences. Ajahn Sumedho would go on to spend the next ten years of his life in Ubon under the guidance of Luang Por. He would form the nucleus around which a community of Western monks coalesced. In 1975, he would establish the branch monastery, Wat Pah Nanachat, before moving to England in 1977. There, at Chithurst, in southern England, he founded the first of several overseas branch monasteries.

When someone once asked Luang Por whether he had any special connection with Westerners that led to so many becoming his disciples, he replied with a smile that as a boy, he had watched a cowboy movie with his friends. Images from it had stuck in his mind ever since, and perhaps they had exerted some kind of attractive force.

One of the characters in the movie was this big man smoking cigarettes. He was so tall! It fascinated me. What kind of human

being could have such a huge body? That image has stuck in my mind until now, and a lot of Westerners have come. If you're talking about causes, there was that.

When Sumedho arrived, he was just like the cowboy in the movie. What a long nose! As soon as I saw him, I thought to myself, 'This monk is a Westerner.' And I told him that I'd seen him before in a movie. So, yes, there were supporting causes and conditions. That's why I've come to have a lot of Western kith and kin. They come even though I can't speak English. I've tried to train them to know the Dhamma as I see it. It doesn't matter that they don't know Thai customs. I don't make anything of it, that's the way things are. I just keep helping them out – that's the gist of it.

When Sumedho asked to be accepted as a student, Luang Por agreed, but made one condition: that he fitted in with the Thai monks and didn't expect any special considerations.

"At the other monasteries in Thailand where I'd lived, the fact that I'd been a Westerner had meant that I could expect to have the best of everything. I could also get out of the work and other mundane things that the other monks were expected to do: 'I'm busy meditating now. I don't have time to sweep the floor. Let someone else sweep it. I'm a serious meditator.' But when I arrived at Wat Pah Pong and people said, 'He's an American; he can't eat the kind of food we eat.' Luang Por said, 'He'll have to learn.' And when I didn't like the meditation hut I was given and asked for another that I liked better, Luang Por said, 'No.' The whole way of training was that you had to conform to the schedule. When I asked Luang Por if I could be excused from the long Dhamma talks, which I didn't understand, he just laughed and said that you have to do what everyone else does."

Wat Pah Pong provided a very different monastic environment to the one Sumedho was familiar with. In his previous wat, he had been living in solitude, sitting and walking at his hut, single-mindedly devoting himself to the development of meditation. The only human contact had been with a novice who brought him his daily meal. It had been a beneficial period for him, but he had become unsure how sustainable such a kind

of monastic life would be in the long term. What he felt he lacked was Vinaya training.

“At Wat Pah Pong, the emphasis was on communal activities – working together, eating together, etc. – with all its rules. I knew that if I was going to live as a monk I needed the monk’s training, and I hadn’t been getting that at the meditation centre that I had been in before. What Luang Por gave me was a living situation to contemplate. You developed an awareness around the monastic tradition, and it was something that I knew I needed. I needed restraint and containment. I was a very impulsive person with a tremendous resistance to any kind of authority.

“I had been in the navy for four years and had developed an aversion to authority and rank. And then, before I went to Thailand, I had spent a few years in Berkeley, California where it was pretty much a case of ‘doing your own thing’. There was no sense of having to obey anybody, or to live under a discipline of any sort. But at Wat Pah Pong, I had to live following a tradition that I did not always like or approve of, in a situation where I had no authority whatsoever. I had a strong sense of my own freedom and right to asserting it, but I had no idea of serving anyone else: being a servant was like admitting you were somehow inferior. So, I found monastic life very useful for developing a sense for serving and supporting the monastic community.

“What impressed me about Luang Por was that although he seemed such a free spirit, an ebullient character, he was, at the same time, very strict with the Vinaya. It was a fascinating contrast. In California, the idea of freedom was being spontaneous and doing what you felt like. The idea of moral restraint and discipline was like this big ogre that’s coming to squash you with all these rules and traditions – you can’t do this and you can’t do that – and pressing down on you so much.

“So my immediate reaction to the strictness of Wat Pah Pong was to feel oppressed. And yet my feeling about Luang Por was that although his actions were always within the margins of the Vinaya, he was a free being. He wasn’t coming from ideas of doing what he liked, but from inner freedom. So in contemplating him, I began to look at the Vinaya so as to use it, not just to cut yourself off or to oppress yourself, but for freedom. It was

a conundrum: how do you take a restrictive and renunciant convention, and liberate your mind through those conventions? I could see that there were no limits to Luang Por's mind. Oftentimes, attachment to rules makes you worry a lot and lack confidence, but Luang Por was radiant. He was obviously not just someone keeping a lot of rules and anxious about his purity. He was a living example of the freedom that comes from practice."

Ajahn Sumedho was impressed and reassured by Luang Por's inquiries about his meditation practice. Luang Por merely acknowledged with a grunt that the method Ajahn Sumedho was using was valid, and gave him permission to carry on with it if he found it useful. It did not seem to be a crucial issue. It was clear that what Luang Por was teaching was not confined to a particular meditation technique: his way was a comprehensive training, the creation of a context or environment in which any legitimate technique would bear fruit. This was exactly what Ajahn Sumedho felt he needed.

"You have to find someone you resonate with. I'd been in other places and nothing had really clicked. I didn't have a fixed idea of having a teacher either; I had a strong sense of independence. But with Luang Por, I felt a very strong gut-reaction. Something worked for me with him.

"The training at Wat Pah Pong was one of putting you in situations where you could reflect on your reactions, objections and so on, so that you began to see the opinions, views, prejudices and attachments that come up naturally in those situations. Luang Por was always emphasizing the need to reflect on the way things are. That is what I found most helpful because when you're as self-centered and opinionated as I was then, you really need to open your mind. So I found Luang Por's way much more clear and direct. As I was very suppressed already, I really needed a way of looking at myself honestly and clearly, rather than just trying to suppress my feelings and force my mind into more refined states. He was also very aware of the individual needs of the monks, so it wasn't like there was a blanket technique. He realized that you really have to figure it out for yourself, and so how I saw him, how he affected me, was that he seemed to provide a backdrop for my life from which I could reflect."

Even with this kind of appreciation of the way of practice at Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Sumedho did not find it easy. Apart from the easily foreseen difficulties and frustrations he experienced with the language, culture, climate and diet, it was the Vinaya, ironically, that caused him most misgivings. His personality had always been an idealistic one; he was drawn to the big picture, the unifying vision, and tended to get impatient with the nuts-and-bolts of everyday life. Unsurprisingly, he felt a natural antipathy to much of the detailed Vinaya instruction, which could seem to him like a continual nit-picking over trivial matters.

“The Vinaya readings were excruciatingly boring. You’d hear about how a monk who has a rent in his robe so many inches above the hem must have it sewn up before dawn and I kept thinking, ‘This isn’t what I became a monk for.’”

The Vinaya texts prescribe various duties to be performed towards a teacher by his students. One of them is to wash the teacher’s feet on his return from alms-round. At Wat Pah Pong, as many as twenty monks would be waiting for Luang Por at the dining hall foot bath, eager for the honour of cleaning the dirt from his feet or of having a hand on the towel that wiped them dry. At first, Ajahn Sumedho found the whole thing slightly ridiculous. Every day, he would look on with bemusement as monks started to make their way out to the foot bath. It was the kind of ritual that made him feel alienated from the rest of the community. He would be aware of the critical, judgemental part of his mind coming to the fore:

“But then I started listening to myself and I thought, ‘This is really an unpleasant frame of mind to be in. Is it anything to get so upset about? They haven’t made *me* do it. It’s all right; there’s nothing wrong with twenty men washing one man’s feet. It’s not immoral or *bad* behaviour, and maybe they enjoy it; maybe they want to do it – maybe it’s all right to do that ... Perhaps *I* should do it.’ So the next morning, *twenty-one* monks ran out and washed Luang Por’s feet. There was no problem after that. It felt really good: that nasty thing in me had stopped.”

Although the Buddha called praise and blame ‘worldly dhammas’, even the most dedicated and unworldly spiritual seekers must learn how to

deal with them skilfully. Throughout his early days at Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Sumedho received generous praise. In Buddhist cultures, the voluntary renunciation of sensual pleasures in favour of spiritual training is an esteemed virtue. The sacrifices Ajahn Sumedho had made to become a monk inspired both his fellow monastics and the monastery's lay supporters. In leaving America and donning the ochre robe, not only had he given up a standard of living that Isan peasant farmers could only dream about, but he had done so in exchange for a life in one of the strictest and most austere forest *wats* in the country. The conservative Isan people – with their sense of security and well-being so bound up with the maintenance of their traditions – were impressed by how well Ajahn Sumedho could live in exile from the conditions he was used to. They were inspired by how diligent and dedicated he was in his practice. As the only Westerner, he stood out and was a centre of attention wherever he went, second only to Luang Por himself.

On the other hand, it is common for Thais to possess a natural, apparently almost effortless physical grace, which is enhanced by the monastic emphasis on developing mindfulness through close attention to form and detail. It confused them to see Ajahn Sumedho, physically imposing and with an obvious zeal for the practice, but at the same time, by their standards, so awkward and ungainly. In most, it provoked a quiet but affectionate amusement; for some, that amusement was soured with a hint of fear, jealousy and resentment. Ajahn Sumedho, both a little paranoid and enjoying the attention, could not help but feel self-conscious.

"They would ask, 'How old are you?' I'd say, 'Thirty-three.' And they'd say, 'Really? We thought you were at least sixty.' Then they would criticize the way I walked, and say, 'You don't walk right. You're not very mindful when you walk.' And I'd take this shoulder bag and I'd just dump it down, without giving it any importance. And they'd say, 'Put your bag down right. You take it like this, fold it over, and then you set it down beside you like that.' The way I ate, the way I walked, the way I talked – it seemed that everything I did was criticized and made fun of – but something made me stay on and endure through it. I actually learned how to conform to a tradition and a discipline – and that took a number of years, really,

because there was always strong resistance. But I began to understand the wisdom of the Vinaya and over the years, my equanimity grew.”

#### PUSHED

After a few years, Luang Por’s attitude to Ajahn Sumedho changed. Seeing his disciple’s growth in confidence and the praise he was receiving, he began to treat him more robustly. Ajahn Sumedho remembers:

“For the first couple of years, Luang Por would compliment me a lot, and boost up my ego, which I appreciated, because I tended to be self-disparaging, and to have this constant very positive attitude towards me was very helpful. Because I felt so respected and appreciated by him, I put a lot of effort into the practice. After a few years, it started to change. He saw I was stronger and he began to be more critical. Sometimes he would insult me and humiliate me in public – but by then I was able to reflect on it.

“There were times that Luang Por would tell the whole Dhamma Hall full of laypeople about things I’d done that were uncouth. Everyone, monks and laypeople, would be roaring with laughter. I’d just sit there feeling angry and embarrassed. One time, a novice picked up my outer robe by mistake and gave it to him. Luang Por laughed and said he knew immediately whose it was because of the bad smell, the ‘farang stink’. Of course, I felt pretty indignant when I heard Luang Por say that; but I could endure it, and because of the respect I felt for him I didn’t show any reaction. He asked me if I was feeling all right and I said yes, but he could see that my ears were bright red.

“He had a wonderful sense of timing and so I could work with it, and I benefited from being able to observe my own emotional reactions to being insulted or humiliated. If he’d done that at the beginning, I would never have stayed. There was no real system that I could see; you just felt that he was just trying to help you ... forcing you to look at your own emotional reactions ... and I always trusted him. He had such a great sense of humour, there was always a twinkle in his eye, always a bit of mischief, and so I just went along with it.”

Many of Ajahn Sumedho's most vivid memories of his early years at Wat Pah Pong are of occasions when some dark cloud or other in his mind dissolved through a sudden insight into the desires and attachments that conditioned it. Luang Por's genius as a teacher seemed to him to lie in creating the situations in which this process could take place – bringing a crisis to a head, or drawing his attention most skilfully to what was really going on in his mind. His faith in Luang Por allowed him to open up. A smile from his teacher or words of encouragement at the right moment could make hours of frustration and irritation seem ridiculous and insubstantial; a sharp question or rebuke could wake him up from a long bout of self-indulgence.

“He was a very practical man, and so he was using the nitty-gritty of daily life for insight. He wasn't so keen on using the special event or extreme practices as on getting you to wake up in the ordinary flow of monastic life, and he was very good at that. He knew that any convention can become perfunctory and deadening after a while if you just get used to it. He was aware of that, and so there was always this kind of sharpness that would startle and jolt you.”

In the early days, frustration was the major fuel of Ajahn Sumedho's suffering. The afternoon leaf sweeping periods could be exhausting in the hot season. One day as he toiled in the sun, his body running with sweat, he remembers his mindfulness becoming consumed by aversion and self-righteousness, and grumbling to himself: ‘I don't want to do this. I came here to get enlightened, not to sweep leaves off the ground.’ Just then Luang Por approached him and said, ‘Where's the suffering? Is Wat Pah Pong the suffering?’

“I suddenly realized something in me which was always complaining and criticizing and which was preventing me from ever giving myself or offering myself to any situation.

“Another time I had this really negative reaction to having to sit up and practise all through the night, and I must have let it show. After the evening chanting, Luang Por reminded everyone that they should stay and meditate right through to dawn. ‘Except’, he said, ‘for Sumedho. He

can go and have a rest.' He gave me a nice smile, and I just felt so stupid. Of course, I stayed all night.

"There were so many moments when you were caught up in some kind of personal thing, and he could sense that. He had the timing to reach you in that moment when you were just ripe so that you could suddenly realize your attachment. One night we were in the small hall where we did the *Pātimokkha*\* and his friend Luang Por Chalui came to visit. Usually, after the *Pātimokkha* was over, we would go and have a hot drink and then join the laypeople in the Dhamma Hall. But on that night, he and Luang Por Chalui sat there joking with each other for hours, and we had to sit there and listen. I couldn't understand what they were talking about, and I got very irritated. I was waiting for him to tell us to go to the hall, but he just carried on. Every now and again, he would glance at me. Well, I had a stubborn streak and I wasn't going to give up. I just got more and more angry and irritated.

"It got to about midnight and they were still going strong, laughing like schoolboys. I got very self-righteous; they weren't even talking seriously about practice or Vinaya or anything! My mind kept saying, 'What a waste of time. They should know better.' I was full of my anger and resentment. He knew that I had this stubborn, tenacious streak and so he kept going until two in the morning, three in the morning. At that time, I just gave up to the whole thing, let go of all the anger and resistance and felt a wave of bliss and relaxation; I felt all the pain had gone. I was in a state of bliss. I felt I'd be happy if he went on forever. He noticed that and told everyone we could leave."

#### SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

Given Ajahn Sumedho's celebrity, and his growing proficiency in Thai, it was natural that Wat Pah Pong's lay supporters would be eager to hear him give a Dhamma talk. Four years after his arrival, Luang Por decided that the time had arrived for his first Western disciple to begin a new kind of training: that of expounding the Dhamma.

\*The new Uposatha Hall, mentioned elsewhere, was built some years later.

The opportunity arose during a trip to a branch monastery. As evening approached, a large number of lay supporters started to file into the monastery to participate in the evening chanting period and to listen to a Dhamma talk from Luang Por. With no prior warning, Luang Por asked Ajahn Sumedho to give the talk. The prospect of ascending the monastery's Dhamma seat and struggling to give an extemporary address to a large audience in a language in which he was not particularly fluent, was an intimidating one. Ajahn Sumedho froze and declined as politely but firmly as he could. But with his strong trust in Luang Por and the realization that he was merely postponing the inevitable, he began to reconcile himself to the idea that soon he would have to start teaching.

When Luang Por 'invited' him to give a talk on the next Observance Day, he acquiesced in silence. Despite being well aware of Luang Por's view that Dhamma talks should not be planned in advance, Ajahn Sumedho felt insecure. At the time, he was reading a book on Buddhist cosmology and reflecting on the relationship between different realms of existence and psychological states. He made some notes for the coming talk.

Observance Day soon came and Ajahn Sumedho gave the talk. Although his vocabulary was still quite rudimentary and his accent shaky, it seemed to go down well. He felt relieved and proud of himself. Throughout the next day, laypeople and monks came up to him to express their appreciation of a fine talk, and he looked forward to basking in the sun of his teacher's praise. But on paying respects to Luang Por beneath his kuti, and seeing his expressionless face, he felt a chill go through his heart. In a quiet voice, Luang Por said, 'Don't ever do that again.' Ajahn Sumedho realized that Luang Por knew that he had thought the talk out beforehand and that, in his eyes, although it had been an intelligent, interesting and informative discourse, it was not the Dhamma speaking; it was merely thoughts and cleverness. The fact that it was a 'good talk' was not the point.

In order to develop the right attitude towards giving Dhamma talks, a monk needs to guard his mind against the desire for praise and appreciation, and he must develop a thick skin. One night, Ajahn Sumedho was asked by Luang Por to give a discourse to the laypeople with an unusual condition – it must last for three hours. After about an hour he had

exhausted his initial subject and began to ramble, hunting with increasing desperation for things to talk about. He paused, repeated himself and embarked on long meandering asides, painfully aware of members of his audience getting bored and restless, dozing, walking out. Just a few dedicated elderly women sat there throughout the whole three hours – slumped, eyes closed – like gnarled trees on a blasted plain. Ajahn Sumedho reflected after it was all over:

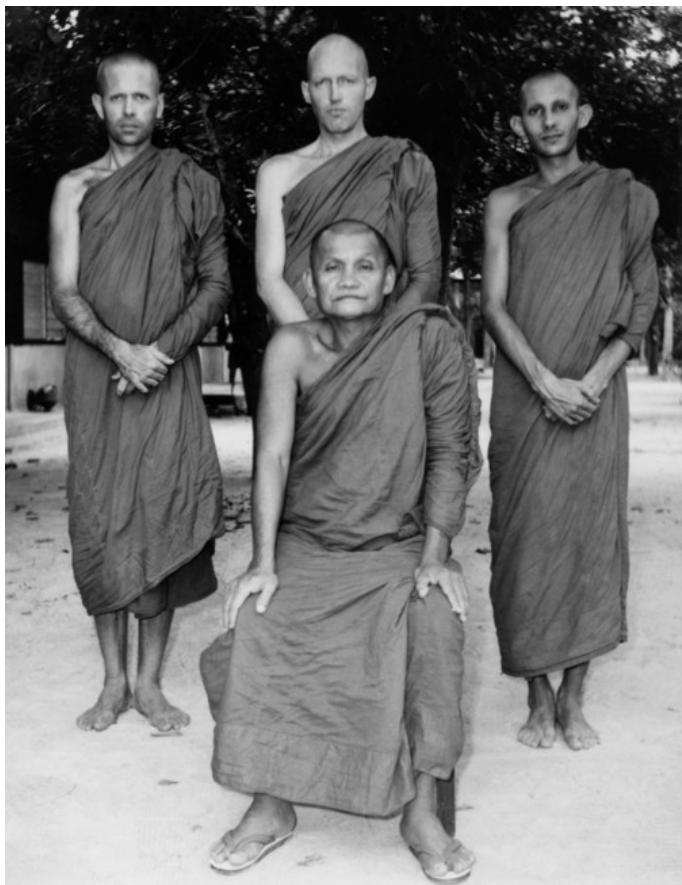
“It was a valuable experience for me. I began to realize that what Luang Por wanted me to do was to be able to look at this self-consciousness, the posing, the pride, the conceit, the grumbling, the laziness, the not-wanting-to-be-bothered, the wanting to please, the wanting to entertain, the wanting to get approval.”

#### TURN AND FACE THE STRANGE

Ajahn Sumedho was the only Western monk at Wat Pah Pong for four years until, in 1971, two more American monks arrived to spend the Rains Retreat. One of them, Dr Douglas Burns, was a psychiatrist based in Bangkok who intended to be a monk for the duration of the retreat; the other was Jack Kornfield (Ven. Santidhammo) who, after practising in monasteries throughout Thailand and Burma, was to return to lay life and become one of the most influential teachers in the American *vipassanā* movement. Neither monk stayed at Wat Pah Pong very long, but both exerted a strong influence on future developments.

At the end of his short period in the robes, Dr Burns returned to Bangkok where he would recommend Westerners interested in becoming monks to go to live with Luang Por. A number of the first generation of monks came to Ubon following such a referral. In the months that Jack Kornfield was with Luang Por, he made assiduous notes of the teachings that he received and later printed them as the very popular *Fragments of a Teaching and Notes from a Session of Questions and Answers*. Subsequently, as Kornfield’s own reputation spread in America, his frequent references to Luang Por introduced Luang Por’s name to a Western audience. This acquaintance was strengthened by *A Still Forest Pool*, a collection of Luang Por’s teachings which Kornfield co-authored with another ex-monk, Paul Breiter (formerly Ven. Varapanyo).

Luang Por's charisma and his ability to move and inspire his Western disciples soon became well-known. But if Luang Por was the main reason Wat Pah Pong became the most popular Thai forest monastery for Westerners seeking to make a long-term commitment to monastic life, Ajahn Sumedho's presence was often a deciding factor. Here was someone who had proved it could be done.



He had lived a number of years in trying conditions with no other Western companions and had obviously gained much from the practice. He was a translator and a mentor. And, although he resisted the evolution, he was also becoming a teacher in his own right. Ven. Varapanyo arrived in Wat Pah Pong at a time when Luang Por was away for a few days. His meeting with Ajahn Sumedho was crucial to his decision to stay.

“Sitting up there on the porch in the peace of the forest night, I felt that here was a place beyond the suffering and confusion of the world – the Vietnam War, the meaninglessness of life in America and everywhere else, the pain and desperation of those I had met on the road in Europe and Asia who were so sincerely looking for a better way of life but not finding it. This man, in this place, seemed to have found it, and it seemed entirely possible that others could as well.”

In 1972, the Sangha of Western monks was steadily increasing and Luang Por decided that they should spend the Rains Retreat at Tam Saeng Pet, a branch monastery perched on a steep hill overlooking the flat Isan countryside, about 100 kilometres to the north of Wat Pah Pong. Away from the guiding influence of Luang Por, personality conflicts festered, and a burned out Ajahn Sumedho left at the end of the retreat.

“To begin with, I felt a lot of resentment about taking responsibility. On a personal level ... the last thing I wanted to do was be with other Western monks ... I was adjusted to living with Thai monks and to feeling at ease within this structure and culture, and yet there was an increasing number of Westerners coming through – Dr Burns and Jack Kornfield had been encouraging people to come.

“After the Western Sangha had this horrendous Rains Retreat at Tam Saeng Pet, I ran away, spent the rains in a monastery in the southeast and then went to India. But while I was there I had a really powerful heart-opening experience. I kept thinking of Luang Por and how I’d run away, and I felt a great feeling of gratitude to him, and I decided that I would go back and serve. It was very idealistic: ‘I’ll just give myself to Luang Por. Anything he wants me to do!’

“We’d just opened this horrible branch monastery at Suan Kluai down on the Cambodian border, and nobody wanted to go and stay there. I’d gone for a Kathina ceremony and been taller than all the trees. So, in India, I thought I’d volunteer to go and take over Suan Kluai. I had this romantic image of myself. Of course, when I got back, Luang Por refused to send me there and by the end of the year, there were so many Westerners at Wat Pah Pong that he asked me to translate for them ... Basically, I trusted

him because he was the one pushing me into things that I wouldn't have done by myself."

### III. THROUGH WESTERN EYES

#### BEGINNINGS

The question which every Western monk would get asked sooner or later (and usually sooner), was why he chose to become a monk. It was often a more difficult question to answer than might be expected. It wasn't so easy to distinguish causes from triggers, or to be sure that an uplifting narrative was not being patched together with hindsight. Monks usually settled on recounting the events leading up to their decision and their departure to Thailand. There was, for instance, Pabhakaro, an American helicopter pilot, who first came to the country on 'R&R' during the Vietnam War. There were the Peace Corps volunteers, and the young travellers backpacking through Asia like the Canadians, Tiradhammo and Viradhammo. There were also those like the British Brahmavamso and the Australian Nyanadhammo who came with the express intention of becoming monks.

Many started off by reading books. The first generation – when books on Theravada Buddhism were hard to find – were inspired by the works of Alan Watts, Charles Luk and DT Suzuki. Later generations arrived having read translated works of Luang Por Chah, books by Ajahn Sumedho or American *vipassanā* teachers. Some were seeking to deepen and stabilize the lucid calm they had experienced on seven- or ten-day meditation retreats. Others were inspired by their contact with Buddhist monks while travelling around Thailand. One amongst the latter was Ajahn Sucitto. He recounts the effect of seeing monks on alms-round:

"One early morning sitting in a cafe, I saw monks from a local monastery walking on alms-round. They were in a line, barefoot in the dusty road, walking towards me. The rising sun glowed through their brown robes. Each monk had only a simple alms-bowl with him, and their faces were serene and gentle. Their walking was calm and unhurried; they were

not going anywhere, they were just walking. The weight of years of self-importance lifted off my heart; something soared within me like a bird at dawn.”

But for the disciples of Luang Por, it was almost invariably his presence and example that inspired them to stay and take the leap into monastic life, or, if they were already ordained, to make a long-term commitment to the Wat Pah Pong training. For most, the first meeting with him, although outwardly inconsequential, was momentous and life changing. Some monks spoke of a sense of relief, as if they had finally found a place and a teacher they didn’t want to leave. As Ajahn Nyanadhammo squatted down respectfully, hands in *anjali*, Luang Por walked over to him, and without speaking, took his hands in his own.

“I felt this shock and joy and a weight fall from my shoulders. I didn’t realize until after he’d gone how much suffering I had been carrying around with me.”

One of the richest sources of anecdotes concerning Luang Por and his Western disciples is to be found in the writings of Paul Breiter. Breiter arrived in Wat Pah Pong in 1972, and, as Ven. Varapanyo, struggled gamely through five years of monastic training before disrobing and returning to his native United States. In 1993, his memoir of the years he spent with Luang Por, *Venerable Father*, was printed in Bangkok. It begins with words that struck a chord with many of his contemporaries: ‘If I have ever loved anybody in my life, then it is Luang Por Chah.’ Ven. Varapanyo’s first meeting with Luang Por took place in Bangkok.

“I was overwhelmed by his radiant, exuberant happiness. I had really never seen anyone like that. He seemed like a big, happy frog sitting on his lily pad, and I thought, if all you have to do to be like that is sit in the forest for thirty years, it’s worth it ... I remember how my spirits were lifted then. In the car going back to the wat, I was thinking, ‘there’s hope’; the practice of meditation and the Buddhist monk’s way of life – both of which I found so difficult, much more difficult than anything I had ever done, thought of doing, or heard of anyone else doing – can produce results. Seeing a living example was worth more than reading any number of books.”

Ajahn Brahmavamso, a monk with a rigorous scientific background, decided to take Luang Por as his teacher after having his rational mind confounded. He recalls that shortly after his arrival in the wat, while listening to Luang Por teaching another Western monk, he mentally formulated his own question. As soon as he'd done so, Luang Por spoke words that seemed to answer his query directly – more so than that of the apparent questioner. Assuming it was probably a coincidence, he formulated another question, which was also promptly answered. This occurred again and again.

Not all of the foreign monks at Wat Pah Pong were from Western countries. Ajahn Gavesako, for instance, was from northern Japan. After a period mountaineering in Nepal, he had devoted himself to learning yoga in India before visa difficulties forced him to leave for Thailand. For him, inspiration first arose from his impression of the monastery itself and what it suggested about the abbot.

“I arrived at the wat just as the monks were leaving on alms-round. I was very impressed to see them walking in a line, composed and restrained. I couldn’t take my eyes away from them. It was such a beautiful sight, something I’d never seen before. I walked into the wat and the path was neat and clean and pleasant to walk along. There were no branches or leaves littering the path. It impressed me even more. I thought the abbot must be very good. He must have a very strict discipline.”

Ajahn Gavesako’s lay name had been Shibahashi. Luang Por found it impossible to pronounce and dubbed him ‘*Si baht ha sip*’ (‘Four baht fifty’). He inspired the young man by explaining how an inner search, a search for the end of suffering, was more valuable than an outer search. Unless he knew how to abandon negative mental states, climbing mountains was a waste of time. This inner search and training lay at the heart of monastic life. ‘Four baht fifty’ decided to stay. Some fifteen years later, when Luang Por was bedridden, Ajahn Gavesako became one of the stalwarts of the nursing shifts. Above all, he was motivated by gratitude. He said that he felt that, however much he did, he would never be able to repay even a small part of the debt he owed his teacher.

“I felt as if he gave me new life. He was like mother and father to me; he gave me so many things. It was like I was slowly sinking into quicksand, just about to be swallowed, and he pulled me out and saved my life.”

The young Australian musician who was later to become Ajahn Puriso, was struck by the contrast between Wat Pah Pong and other temples: the sombre coloured robes of the monks, their composure as they went about their duties, their aloofness – the sense that something meaningful was going on.

“I was told I could stay in the Dhamma Hall, informed where to find a pillow and a blanket, and then left to myself. The eerie Pali-Thai chanting I heard that night was totally beyond my mind’s grasp. I couldn’t even figure out if it sounded good or just strange. But the sight of the monks in the great, dark hall, lit with only a few candles, squatting immobile on their toes as they chanted for more than thirty minutes, was truly awe-inspiring.”

Ajahn Pasanno, abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat for over ten years and now abbot of Abhayagiri Forest Monastery in Northern California, first came to Wat Pah Pong as a visiting monk after having entered the Sangha in Bangkok. His thoughts echo those of Ajahn Sumedho:

“An abiding impression I gained of the way of life at Wat Pah Pong was that this was something that you could live over a long time, whereas at the places I had practised meditation before, it was a matter of applying a particular technique in a kuti in a special section of a monastery; it wasn’t something that could be lived. Wat Pah Pong opened up a new dimension for me – that sense of being able to make a long-term commitment to a teacher, a training and the Vinaya. What struck me very strongly was the thought that, if you were going to lead the Holy Life for any length of time and reap benefits from it, then you would need to keep the Vinaya, to have an integrated lifestyle of Dhamma-Vinaya practice.

“Luang Por really understood very clearly how completely we need to restructure our perceptions and every aspect of our conditioning. So his way of teaching was not just a meditation technique but a complete training of body, speech and mind. That was really the hallmark, his emphasis, what I feel was special about him.”

After a period of probation as a visiting monk (*āgantuka*), Ajahn Pasanno was fully accepted into the Wat Pah Pong community.

"I remember looking forward to being able to participate in the *Pātimokkha* and getting quite excited. When the bell was rung, I was very eager and immediately made my way to the Uposatha Hall. Luang Por didn't show up for another hour and a half – he was over in the Maechee Section giving them a talk – and I had a lot of trouble sitting on the hard floor. We hadn't even started the *Pātimokkha*, and I was already squirming. Luang Por came and chatted back and forth with various monks, and then, we performed the *Pātimokkha*. Afterwards – about 10 p.m. – he started to give a discourse, and that went on until almost three o'clock in the morning, when he looked over innocently at the clock and said, 'Maybe you'd better ring the bell for morning chanting.' Then Luang Por walked into the Dhamma Hall to give a short talk to the laypeople, and we went to have a drink. The kettles of sweet drinks had been standing there since the previous evening and were full of ants. I must confess that quickly dampened my enthusiasm for *Pātimokkha*."

#### MANY LUANG PORS

Naturally enough, perceptions of Luang Por varied considerably from monk to monk, reflecting their own differing experiences and ideals, biases and projections, and the clarity of their minds. Some sought to be close to him. Others, more self-sufficient, kept themselves at a greater distance. Different aspects of his teachings appealed to different monks, and there were various opinions as to where exactly the essence of it all lay.

For Ajahn Munindo, who, like Ajahn Sumedho, had begun his monastic life in a monastery with an emphasis on solitary, formal meditation practice, it was Luang Por's more group-oriented approach.

"The thing that most attracted me to come up to Ubon was that *Fragments of a Teaching* showed that Luang Por was really committed to training his monks, which was something that I had not seen elsewhere. What characterized Luang Por's teaching as far as I could see, was his insistence on our learning to live together as a community – meditation of course,

that's what we're here for – but that we should also view our communal, monastic lifestyle as central to practice. Somehow, I got the message that that was what he was about, and I realized that's what I needed.

"It wasn't that he'd tell you all the answers. He was there for you – he would listen to you and give you space to experiment, get it wrong. His teaching was an invitation to figure it out. He seemed to see that his job was to get us established in the monks' life, but that it was then up to us to do the practice. There was the feeling that he wasn't going to take you and guide you step-by-step through the teachings and various stages of meditation. He said he wasn't interested in giving daily interviews. This was clearly not his way. It was giving you the guidelines of how to live as a monk. I didn't take that as an abandonment; it was freedom – personally, I welcomed it."

To Ajahn Munindo, it was Luang Por himself and the quality of attention he gave to his disciples, that was most inspiring. Here, he felt, was a teacher 'who was going to be there for whatever situation that might arise'. Luang Por made them feel like they were his sons and was always concerned with their welfare.

"He was available as a human being with a good sense of humour. He could share a joke with you, he could share your suffering with you. You felt he understood you, that he knew what you were thinking or going through. You felt he was there with you in your life and your struggles and your joy."

Ajahn Munindo cherished the memory of the daily visits that Luang Por made to his kuti to check on his condition during a period of illness. He also appreciated being able to speak to Luang Por when doubts and worries threatened to overwhelm him:

"I remember going to see him once, full of doubts. Luang Por just sat there and listened. He must have heard that kind of thing a thousand times before, but I really felt he looked at me and saw me and he said, 'I felt like that once. I felt like my head was going to explode or split open. I doubted so much I thought my head was going to burst. I know what it's like. But never mind. Working like this with doubts makes you stronger.'"

Ven. Varapanyo agreed that kind words and gestures could be more memorable than profound teachings:

“Luang Por had visited us briefly at Wat Tam Saeng Pet. It was afternoon, we were outside, and he came up to me and looked me over. He felt my ribs and, with a very concerned look on his face, remarked how skinny I’d gotten – it was not only my mind that had been freaking out. For many months afterwards, I remembered that look of concern.”

A turning point in Ven. Varapanyo’s monastic life came with the opportunity to be Luang Por’s attendant.

“He said, ‘In the afternoon, when water hauling is finished, you can come here and clean up.’ My first reaction was, ‘He’s got a lot of nerve, telling me to come and wait on him!’ But apart from being one of my duties, it was a foot in the door, and a privilege. Through it I was to start seeing that there was a way of life in the monastery – rich, structured and harmonious. And at the centre of it all is the teacher, who is someone to be relied upon.

“And finally, he asked, why was I so skinny? Immediately, one of the monks who was there told him that I took a very small ball of rice at meal time. Did I not like the food? I told him I just couldn’t digest much of the sticky rice so I kept cutting down. I had come to accept it as the way it was, thinking I was so greedy that eating less and less was a virtue.

“But he was concerned. Did I feel tired? Most of the time I had little strength, I admitted. So he said: ‘I’m going to put you on a special diet for a while, just plain rice gruel and fish sauce to start with. You eat a lot of it and your stomach will stretch out, and then we’ll go to boiled rice, and finally to sticky rice. I’m a doctor’, he added. (I found out later that he actually was an accomplished herbalist, as well as having knowledge of the various illnesses monks are prone to.) He told me not to push myself too much, if I didn’t have the strength, I didn’t have to carry water, etc.

“That was when the magic really began. That was when he was no longer just ‘Ajahn Chah’ to me; he became ‘Luang Por’, ‘Venerable Father’.”

Most of the Westerners who came to Wat Pah Pong with the intention of becoming monks had read a lot of Buddhist books, and carried with them ideas of how a monastery and an enlightened master *should* be. It

was often when Luang Por confounded those expectations that he made the deepest impression. For Ajahn Amaro, it was a generous smile at a time when he was expecting to be admonished for a mistake. At the time, Ajahn Amaro, still a novice, was serving as attendant to the then-abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, Ajahn Pabhakaro, during an overnight visit from Luang Por.

“I woke up and saw light coming through the gaps between the planks in the walls of my hut. I thought, ‘Wow, the moon is really bright tonight.’ I looked at my alarm clock and it said one o’clock. Then I realized, ‘My clock must have stopped; that’s not the moon, that’s the sun!’ So I leapt up, gathered my robes on and raced down the path. When I got to the back of the Dhamma Hall, all the other monks had already left on alms-round, except Ajahn Pabhakaro and Luang Por, who were going on a shorter route. I thought, ‘OK, I’ve still got time. Maybe they didn’t notice.’ So I started to prepare their robes for alms-round, hoping they didn’t see that I’d arrived late and had missed the morning chanting and sitting. While I was kneeling down by Luang Por’s feet, tying up the tags at the bottom end of his robes, he said something in Thai which I couldn’t understand. I looked up, slightly anxiously, toward Ajahn Pabhakaro for translation. Luang Por had a big grin on his face, a wonderful friendly loving smile. Then Ajahn Pabhakaro translated, ‘Sleep’s delicious, huh?’ ”

For Ajahn Khemanando, another British-born monk, a key moment occurred when he unexpectedly saw his teacher in a new, more approachable light. One day, newly arrived and still wearing the white robes of the postulant, he had been chatting with a friend on the balcony of his kuti, when, glancing down the path, he had been shocked to see Luang Por.

“And he was calling out and beckoning with his hand! We thought he was going to scold us for not meditating diligently, but Luang Por didn’t seem bothered at all, he wasn’t telling us to stop talking, but calling to us, ‘Come here, come here!’ ”

It transpired that Luang Por was on a monitor lizard hunt. He was very fond of the forest chickens, which he would feed with rice in the area around his own kuti. He wanted to protect them from their natural enemy, the large monitor lizards, which liked to eat their eggs. He had

tracked one of these lizards to this part of the forest and now mimed an explanation to them of how to fix a string-snare to the end of a bamboo pole. He was going to catch the lizard and have it banished from the forest. The two clumsy, inexperienced Westerners, goaded on by an enthusiastic Luang Por, thrashed around unsuccessfully for some time, and finally, after enjoying a good laugh together, gave up the hunt.

“What struck me most about this little episode was the contrast between Luang Por the lizard hunter, displaying a very natural spontaneity and down-to-earth, almost child-like simplicity and humour, and the awe-inspiring formality of his role as head of a large, important monastery which, up to this point, was all I had ever seen of him. This had the effect of undermining many of my own preconceptions regarding what a great, enlightened teacher was supposed to be like, and helped me to see that Luang Por was actually very natural and quite funny which allowed me to feel less intimidated and more relaxed in being around him.”

For another newly arrived postulant, Shaun, the memorable occasion occurred in a more formal setting.

“It was New Year’s Eve and the Dhamma Hall was jam-packed. We’d all gathered to see in the New Year with Dhamma talks and auspicious chanting. As there was no space inside, hundreds more people were sitting out under the trees. The raised platform at the western end of the hall where the monks sat was equally packed. In the middle of the platform, directly below the large, bronze Buddha image, sat Luang Por, surrounded by all his monastic disciples. It was a marvellous, thrilling scene. Suddenly, I saw a slight ripple pass through the rows of monks. One of the senior monks, his hands in anjali, leaned towards Luang Por. Immediately, Luang Por got up and his sitting cloth was moved to one side.

“Shortly afterwards, an old monk wearing the brighter yellow robes of a city monk walked onto the platform. I couldn’t help comparing him unfavourably with Luang Por, who always looked so immaculate. The old monk’s robe was crumpled and kept falling off his shoulder. I was not impressed and wondered what Luang Por’s reaction to a visit at such an inconvenient time would be. He answered me immediately with his

humble and respectful demeanour. The old monk knelt down on Luang Por's seat, bowed to the Buddha in a perfunctory way, and then turned around to face the Sangha. Luang Por led all of his monk disciples in bowing to the old monk, followed by the novices, nuns and laypeople in their turn. It seemed to me that I'd never appreciated the beauty of a bow until I saw Luang Por bow that night. But, more than that, what particularly struck me and has stayed in my mind ever since, was the fluency with which Luang Por switched from being the centre of all attention and devotion to an ordinary monk paying respects to a senior. I felt that I was seeing a perfect expression of the teacher as head of a Sangha, but subservient to Dhamma and Vinaya."

In speaking of the admirable qualities of their teacher, Westerners frequently referred to Luang Por's uncanny ability to adapt to the changing imperatives of situations and audiences – apparently without effort, and as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Interestingly, it was an ability rarely mentioned by his Thai disciples. The hierarchical nature of Thai society, the emphasis on social harmony and prioritizing the needs of the group over the individual, means that most people, including non-meditators, are quite accomplished in adapting to the social environment. It is likely that the more profound expression of this ability in a great spiritual teacher, was thus less obviously special to the Thais than to the Westerners. The Westerners, for their part, felt inspired by what they recognized as an impressive non-attachment to social roles and personality. The sense that Luang Por could be anything at all because he identified with nothing whatsoever as an abiding self, was captured well by Ajahn Amaro, when relating the time he was asked to deliver a message to Luang Por at his kuti:

"I saw that he was sitting downstairs on his rattan seat. His eyes were closed, and there was no one else around. When I went up and kneeled in front of him, he didn't open his eyes, and I thought, 'Hmm, I wonder what I should do?' I waited a few minutes and his eyes were still closed. Some important Ajahn was waiting, so I said in Thai, 'Excuse me.' Then he opened his eyes and it was like there was absolutely nobody there. It wasn't like he was asleep; the eyes came open, but there was no expression on his face. It was completely empty. He looked at me, and I looked at him

and said, ‘Luang Por, Ajahn Chu asked me to bring a message that some people have come to the Dhamma Hall and would it be possible for you to come and receive them.’

“Again, for a moment there was no expression, just this completely spacious, empty quality in his expression. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, the personality appeared. He made some remark that I didn’t quite catch the details of. It was as if suddenly the ‘person’ appeared – it was like watching a being coming into existence. There was an extraordinary quality in that moment, seeing the personality, the body, all the characteristics of person-hood, just being taken up like he was putting on his robe or he was assuming a role.”

#### SKILFUL MEANS

If there is anything which distinguished Luang Por from his great contemporaries, it was his ability to guide a large and flourishing Sangha of foreign monks. It is true that Luang Ta Maha Bua in Udon usually had five or six Western monks with him, including Ajahn Panyavaddho, the greatly revered and most senior of all the foreign monks in Thailand. But it was Luang Por alone who was able to oversee a Sangha that had reached over twenty monks by the mid-1970s and is still growing to this day.

The reasons for this success may be found both in Luang Por himself and the system of monastic training that he developed. Initially, it was Luang Por’s charisma that drew people in. Over time, in his dealings with the foreign monks, he showed an ability to communicate with them unhampered by the obstacles of language and culture. Despite being unable to speak to them in their own tongue, his Western disciples felt that he genuinely understood them. Ajahn Khemanando noted:

“He was very observant and could quite accurately assess the personality of an approaching new-comer by watching their faces, their postures, the way they walked, etc. Before they had even sat down or said anything, Luang Por might make a remark to those present such as: ‘This one’s full of doubt!’, that subsequent conversation would invariably reveal to be true.”

Luang Por seemed to realize clearly how different the needs of his Western disciples could be from those of his fellow Thais. The local monks were

largely from poor rice farming families. They tended to be pragmatic rather than speculative in character, and their defilements usually veered towards the more undisguised forms of greed, hatred and delusion. Consideration of this influenced Luang Por's development of a training that emphasized 'going against the grain'. The Westerners' problems, however, often tended to be of a more intellectual bent. They could easily get caught up in tortuous webs of thought and opinion. They struggled with difficulties hard for Thais to understand, particularly a baffling kind of self-aversion they called 'guilt'. The Westerners found it hard to put forth concerted effort into meditation without dropping into old ruts of obsessively goal-oriented striving that created more stress and tension than inner peace.

While Luang Por was not infallible in his treatment of the Western monks, he was adept at learning from mistakes. He soon saw how the authoritarian, occasionally hectoring tone to which the Thai monks responded so well, didn't work with his foreign disciples at all. They had grown up with a distrust of authority, took criticism more personally and responded much better to informality and kindness. Whereas most young Thai monks did not expect a personal relationship with their teacher – most indeed would have felt uncomfortable if one had been offered – the Westerners needed to feel 'seen', to feel taken under the teacher's wing. With the Westerners, Luang Por was noticeably less stern. He appreciated the sacrifices they had made to come so far and live in the forest, and so he made allowances. He quickly saw how effectively humour could dissolve his Western disciples' self-importance. But whereas most of the Thai monks believed that the more relaxed way Luang Por behaved around the Western monks was simply a 'skilful means' he was employing for their benefit, many of the Westerners tended to see in it a revelation of the 'real Luang Por'. It was a common theme: everyone tended to see *their* Luang Por as the real Luang Por.

Luang Por reassured the Western monks that the difficulties they were experiencing were transitory, and inevitable, given that they were taking on the power of defilements accumulated over uncountable lifetimes. It was, he said, like a very small army taking on a much larger one. Until you could marshal your resources and strengthen your forces, you should be

prepared for a few humbling defeats. When he saw that the Westerners were downcast at how much harder it seemed to be for them to calm their minds than it was for their Thai friends, he explained that, although it was true that monks with little formal education found it easier to let go of attachment to the thinking mind than their more educated companions, they tended to be at a disadvantage in the development of wisdom. He compared the Western mind to a large house with many rooms. It took longer to clean than a simple cottage, he said, but once the work was done, it might be a better place in which to live.

## PATIENCE

It was not easy for the Westerners to adapt to life at Wat Pah Pong. Not only were they faced with all the innate, fundamental challenges of an ascetic life, but these were compounded by the need to learn a new language and adapt to a new culture. Physically, it could be brutal. The heat of the hot season, combined with the energy sapping humidity, made for a particularly enervating climate. Many of the foreign monks developed gastric disorders, especially those whose diet had formerly consisted of highly refined foods. They found sticky rice heavy and hard to digest, but with only one meal a day, they had little choice but to eat a large ball of it. The alternative was losing a lot of weight, and, indeed, many of the monks became so thin their ribs protruded alarmingly. Most of those who stayed on became seriously ill at least once: malaria, scrub typhus and amoebic dysentery were a constant threat.

Luang Por told them to patiently endure. When Ajahn Brahmavamso was hospitalized with a high fever, Luang Por visited him and encouraged him with words that were as far from mollycoddling as could be imagined. He told the young monk to reflect that there were only two outcomes to his illness: either he'd get better or he wouldn't. He should be at peace with both possibilities.

On one occasion, Ven. Sunyo told Luang Por that he felt that since becoming a monk his hardships and suffering had increased rather than decreased. Luang Por replied:

I know that some of you have had a background of material comfort and outward freedom. By comparison, now you live an austere existence. Then, in the practice, I often make you sit and wait for long hours. Food and climate are different from your home. But everyone must go through some of this. This is the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. This is how you learn. When you get angry and feel sorry for yourself, it is a great opportunity to understand the mind. The Buddha called defilements our teachers ...

On such occasions Luang Por would conclude with his keynote teachings: patience and Right View.

You must be patient. Patience and endurance are essential to our practice. When I was a young monk, I didn't have it as hard as you. I knew the language and was eating my native food. Even so, some days I despaired. I thought about disrobing or even killing myself. This kind of suffering comes from wrong views. However, once you have seen the truth, you become free from views and opinions. Everything becomes peaceful.

On another occasion, after reminding the monks that 'patience is the heart of Dhamma practice, the root virtue of practitioners', Luang Por observed that, as few people would freely choose to practice patience, the Westerners could be said to have one advantage: it was much harder for them to run away than the Thais. He said, 'The thought of going all the way home is daunting, and so you've been able to put up with it so far.' But it wasn't enough for them to simply grit their teeth. They needed to see the purpose for exercising patience. He was not advocating asceticism for its own sake.

Things here run counter to your old habits. You eat out of your bowl, with the curries and sweets all put in together. Who could like doing that? If you've still got any defilements left, then they will be continually thwarted. Food of different kinds gets mixed together in your bowl. How does that feel? Do you see any defilement arising in your mind? Have a look. This way of eating is niggling and frustrating. That's how it's meant to be.

The training is a wearing away of defilements. Even if the effort to awaken *sati* is not always successful, you can at least oppose defilement. That's how the training has to be.

Sadly, the intellectual defilements of the Western monks did not entail a compensatory deficit in the earthier afflictions, and they were not spared Luang Por's methods intended to '*toraman* the defilements'. The rationale was explained to them on many occasions: defilements could be most clearly revealed as defilements – the cause of suffering, and not-self – when they were steadfastly opposed. Looking at what happened when one was separated from the liked and united with the disliked provided a simple shortcut to understanding the nature of the mind. As this path of opposing desire was one that few people, even dedicated monastics, could follow consistently in a balanced, constructive way on their own, it was embedded in the heart of the training at Wat Pah Pong.

For some, the need to constantly go against old habits could be overwhelming. One English postulant famously exclaimed loudly in a broad northern accent: 'This going against the stream: it's not a babbling brook we're talking about here, it's WHITE WATER!'

One of the monks who felt the brunt of this style of teachings was Ven. Varapanyo. His well-known craving for iced drinks – a cause of much teasing – meant that he was seldom given the chance to indulge it.

"When I went to Luang Por's kuti, it was as though he didn't even see me. If there was ice or a drink for the monks, he would wait until I left before passing it out ... Years later, he recounted these episodes, saying that he felt for me, but that he knew he had to give me a hard time for my own benefit ... 'Now you see the value in such treatment, don't you?' I did. He often said jokingly, to me and to the Sangha, 'I would be afraid to go to America, because Varapanyo would probably want to get me back for torturing him.'"

Ven. Varapanyo also recalled an occasion when a visiting monk received similar treatment.

"Just before the Rains Retreat, a newly ordained American showed up. He was just out of the Peace Corps and was planning to stay in robes for a few

months before going back home. He wanted to stay at Wat Pah Pong for the retreat, but Luang Por refused. It had nothing to do with the monk personally. Rather, it was the fact that Luang Por wanted to put new people through a probationary period which couldn't be done during the retreat, and that he sometimes was not so keen on people who weren't seriously committed but were just dabbling in monkhood.

"So the monk stayed a few days and prepared to leave, somewhat disappointed. One night before he left, Luang Por came to the Dhamma Hall to give a talk. After chanting was done, he spoke for an hour with a layman who had come. Then he began his Dhamma talk. He went on and on. And on. After a couple of hours, it was obvious he was playing with us. One new monk was foolish enough to ask a question, and he gave a very long answer. Then he asked, does anyone have any more questions? Nobody stirred, I thought, 'Maybe he will let us go now', but he said, 'Well, maybe you were uncertain about ...' and went into more explanation. It seemed that he covered everything in the entire Buddhist Canon. Meanwhile, the Peace Corps monk, who had been sitting directly in front of him, was squirming around, changing sitting positions, holding his drawn up knees (definitely not to be done), and glaring angrily at Luang Por. Finally, at 1.15 a.m., Luang Por looked at the clock and innocently said, 'What time is it? Oh, I guess it's time to adjourn.'

"Perhaps I should mention that we never sat comfortably in chairs, but flat on the floor, and at Wat Pah Pong the floors were concrete or marbly granite. We couldn't stretch our legs out or put our knees up in front of us or use a cushion. If you're accustomed to sitting on chairs, try it for two or three hours and you'll appreciate what it was like; if you are accustomed to sitting on the floor, try four or five hours on a hard floor with no cushion.

"The next day, the Peace Corps monk came to me to complain, 'He shouldn't have done that! What a waste of time! That's the extreme of self-mortification!' (The Buddha's Middle Way means avoiding the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification.) That afternoon Luang Por asked me if the new monk liked his talk the night before. I told him what he had said. He laughed, and said, 'I saw. I was observing him. I knew he was angry. Now he won't feel bad about not being able to stay here.' "

Luang Por himself seemed to have an endless store of patience with his ‘high maintenance’ Western disciples. Ajahn Khemadhammo recounts:

“I remember him listening attentively as I laboured to explain some of the difficulties I’d been having, and then grinning and pointing to himself and saying, ‘Me, too!’ – and that was it. And he was amazingly tolerant. Really, with so many monks and a few really awkward ones, like me whose language he couldn’t speak, it must have been an awful lot to put up with. But he never seemed to mind, except on one occasion when something went badly wrong, and then it was as if a jolly, happy old frog suddenly metamorphosed into the most terrifying species of monk-eating tiger you can imagine. He didn’t mess about. I liked that.”

## WORK PROJECTS

In the end, it was the Western monks’ belief in Luang Por’s wisdom and compassion that allowed them to give themselves to the training. He pushed them out of their comfort zone. He showed them that they could do far more than they thought they could, endure things that, alone, they would never have endured. Work projects were one good example. Every now and again, there would be an intense period of hard physical labour, usually a building project, and the daily routine would be transformed. Morning chanting at three, a one or two hour alms-round at dawn, meal at eight – these were sacrosanct. But after the daily meal was over there might be a string of days when the monks would become cement mixers and labourers from midmorning until after dark. Working long hours in temperatures exceeding thirty degrees and humidity above 90%, fuelled by one meal a day and four or five hours of sleep, stretched them to the limits.

The construction of a new Uposatha Hall was one of the last major projects that Luang Por was to oversee. The Uposatha Hall is usually the most beautiful and ornate building in a monastery. Often, many years have passed before a newly established monastery has sufficient funds to build such a hall. This was the case at Wat Pah Pong. From its inception, *Pātimokkha* recitations took place in a small nondescript building behind the dining hall. Only in 1977 did work begin on the erection of an imposing Uposatha Hall, designed by an architect disciple of Luang Por in an unorthodox

modern style. The building was to be situated to the west of the Dhamma Hall on a raised platform of earth some three metres high. The earth for this base was brought in by truck, but with no machinery available, the task of moving it into place and pounding it solid fell to the monastics.

It was gruelling work, accomplished with wheelbarrows, bamboo baskets and wooden pounders. The monks would begin at nine in the morning and finish by the light of kerosene lanterns at nine or ten at night. Most of the Thais, being from farming backgrounds, were not unused to this type of work in these kinds of conditions. But for the Westerners, predominantly from urban, middle class backgrounds, it was a harsh test of endurance. Worse perhaps than the physical ordeal, was the mental resistance. One monk said:

“The choice was to do it in a grudging way, longing to be away from all the activity and exhaustion, back in your kuti meditating, or just give yourself to the work. It made more sense to say to yourself: ‘Luang Por’s my teacher, and he wants me to do this. He’s not asking me to do anything wrong, just something I don’t want to do. Why make myself miserable with wanting something I can’t have right now?’ Also, I’d notice that if I did think wistfully of being away somewhere doing formal meditation, the meditations I imagined I’d be having were always more peaceful than the real ones I was actually having at that time.”

The presence of Luang Por put others’ minds at rest. One monk said:

“Just catching sight of Luang Por walking around looking so solid, so unshakeable, I would be filled with this absolute certainty that he knew exactly what he was doing. ‘If this project was all right by him,’ I’d think, ‘it’s certainly good enough for me.’”

With the conclusion of the work on the mound, Luang Por left for a few days and an almost farcical period of earth shifting ensued. The acting abbot decided that the left-over earth, which had just been laboriously shifted to a discreet location, would be better placed at a different spot. The monks were asked to return to work in order to shift the earth for a second time – a job requiring some three days hard work. On Luang Por’s return, however, he declared his preference for the original location and the earth had to be carried, wheelbarrow by wheelbarrow, basket by

basket, back to the original spot. Some of the Western monks remembered having read about the trials of the Tibetan yogi Milarepa, and now felt that they had a better idea of what had been involved.

Nevertheless, the value of this kind of interlude was not lost on the monks involved. Another monk commented:

“Luang Por was always creating situations where we’d have to face up to our old ingrained habits, particularly the ones in which we created suffering for ourselves by wanting things to be other than the way they were. He helped us to see our craving and, in everyday situations, how it fed our discontent, how we lied to ourselves.”

Ajahn Brahmavamso summarized:

“It taught me to look for the cause of suffering, not in the externals, but in ‘me’, in ‘my attitude’, in ‘my craving’, in ‘my attachment’, in ‘my delusions.’ ... And that if you cannot work and be peaceful, if you cannot move earth all day and be at peace with it, you will never be freed from suffering.”

#### IV. ON THE NOSE

##### FACING THE FACTS

Luang Por showed much compassion for the difficulties of his Western disciples, but he could also tease them when they became self-indulgent. On one occasion, he mimed wiping imaginary tears from his eyes and saying tragically, ‘He’s my father, I’m his son ...’, before chuckling and shaking his head. The performance left a deep impression on Ven. Varapanyo, for whom it was ‘an example of the way Luang Por saw through the self-important attitude that Westerners are especially prone to, how it needlessly glorifies, and increases, suffering’.

Ajahn Santacitto recalled being part of a group of monks helping to bathe Luang Por:

“As our many hands lathered his limbs and torso he said to me: ‘Santacitto, did you ever bathe your father this way?’ Though I’d learned – sometimes the hard way – not to take this kind of question at face value, I followed what seemed a safe path and referred to differences in culture to explain why I never had. Then he said: ‘That’s why the practice is so difficult for you.’ His simple words hit me very hard.”

Many of Luang Por’s most memorable teachings involved putting monks in positions where they were brought face-to-face with their defilements and had no choice but to let them go. The reactions to praise and blame were a fertile ground for such instruction.

Ajahn Viradhammo spent his first Rains Retreat at a branch monastery and, while he was there, memorized the *Pātimokkha*. Chanted at speed, the text takes some forty-five minutes to recite, and learning it by heart is a formidable undertaking. He returned to Wat Pah Pong at the end of the year with a sense of accomplishment. But being a young monk, he assumed it would be a long time before he would be given the honour of reciting the text alone in the midst of the whole Wat Pah Pong Sangha.

“Luang Por light-heartedly asked if I would chant the *Pātimokkha*, fully expecting that I didn’t know it. I surprised him by saying I would give it a go. With considerable performance anxiety, I chanted the rules in a fairly decent style and Luang Por heaped praise on me.

“Getting so much praise from Luang Por was no small thing, and my heart swelled with happiness and pride at the honour and attention I had been given. A fortnight later, Luang Por commanded me to chant again. This felt a bit strange because it was not a request, but I thought I would be able to show my stuff once again. Nervous as always, I set forth with the introductory chant but, within a few stanzas, Luang Por was tugging at my outer robe\* and telling the monk beside him that this fellow who is chanting stinks. He said: ‘Doesn’t he wash his robes?’

“My powers of concentration were limited at the best of times, and this interruption was quite upsetting. I lost my focus, made some errors,

\* See Appendix I

regained my focus and started again. For the next hour, Luang Por continued to interrupt my concentration again and again. Each time, I became more confused or angry and had an extremely difficult time finishing the recitation. I can't remember if the other monks were chuckling to themselves, but it was obvious that Luang Por was offering a very direct and difficult teaching: 'You like praise and success, but when you are blamed and fail you suffer. Go beyond praise and blame to be free from suffering.'

#### A NATURAL PERFUME

Luang Por soon realized that humour was amongst the most effective tools he had at his disposal for teaching his Western disciples. It allowed him to point out their mental defilements in a way that they did not find oppressive or fill them with self-aversion. Encouraging them to see the humorous side of their frustrations, irritations and anger, he showed them how to laugh at themselves and so let go of identification with their foibles. But he did not do this by cracking jokes for cheap laughs. Instead, he pointed out the absurdity of their cravings, regaled them with outlandish analogies, enacted hilarious anecdotes. Monks might not always laugh out loud at his sallies, but it was hard for them to keep a straight face when he was in such a mood. Ven. Varapanyo remembers one teaching given to an American monk called Gary that became something of a legend.

"Gary had a girlfriend back home, and thought that he might want to go back and marry her someday – he had entered monastic life without a sense of long-term commitment. Then the 'Dear John' letter came: she had married someone else. I wasn't there at the time, but others said Gary was pretty upset. One day, someone mentioned it to Luang Por. With his merciless compassion, he advised Gary to write to the woman and ask her to send him a vial with some of her shit in it. Then, whenever he thought of her with longing, he should open the vial and smell it."

On another occasion, a rumour spread that the Communists were putting some chemical in the noodles that made penises shrivel up. Luang Por advised the monks that if they noticed their penis starting to shrink, then they should tie a big knot in it so that it wouldn't disappear completely.

## WORDS

Luang Por shared with many people of his culture a love of language and word play. His Dhamma talks were often studded with puns and unorthodox usage. So it was with real delight that he observed the misadventures of his Western disciples in their efforts to learn the tonal Thai language. Gaffes were frequent because, although Thai grammar is straightforward, the tones are a minefield. The word ‘*lek*’, for example, pronounced in a high-tone means ‘little’ and with a low-tone, ‘iron’. One day, Luang Por told a young Australian monk to go and fetch the monk who lived in the hut with the iron door. When the monk returned many minutes later, unsuccessful in his search, he was confused by a gale of laughter when he told Luang Por, that all the kuti doors seemed to be the same size.

The more embarrassing mispronunciations would enter monastery folklore. Of these, the most notorious occurred when a monk, advising Luang Por not to visit the West in December, thought he had given the reason that there would be a lot of snow around at that time of year. What he had actually said – and in the crudest of terms – was that it wouldn’t be a good idea to go right then given the seasonal profusion of dog vaginas.

When teaching his Western disciples, Luang Por took their varying language skills into account. Apart from the formal translated Dhamma talks that he delivered, he often gave short teachings couched in very simple phrases to prevent misunderstanding. The exhortations to endure, ‘*Ot Ton!*’ and to let go, ‘*Ploi Wang!*’ were soon known to everyone. He used easily grasped metaphors and similes: ‘You’re like someone who wants a duck to be a chicken’, he might say. Often his words would be unexpected, apparently off the cuff, and the recipient might walk away thinking, ‘Did he just say what I think he said?’ ‘What thing is this mind?’ he once asked rhetorically. ‘No thing at all.’

## BUGBEARS

A recurring debate in the transmission of Buddhism to the West has been over the extent to which the Dhamma can or should be separated from the cultural context, or ‘trappings’, in which it has been transmitted over

the centuries. A Buddhism tailored to the West, untied to Asian customs, has been a goal for many pioneers. But for the Westerners who made their way to Wat Pah Pong, submitting themselves to monastic training implied an acceptance of the whole Thai Buddhist package. For some monks, adapting to the Thai style of doing things could be irksome. ‘But that’s not in the Vinaya, it’s just Thai custom!’ was a common grouse of monks admonished for a *faux pas* such as using a head pillow as a sitting cushion. Few of the Thai monks made any distinction between those parts of monastic custom traceable to the Buddha’s time and those of more recent and local provenance. A Western monk showing disrespect for any one facet of the training could be seen as looking down on the whole thing. Luang Por exhorted the Western monks to be humble, respectful and observant in the face of things unfamiliar to them, to let go of attachments to their old ways.

A bugbear for a number of Western monks was having to participate in ceremonies that seemed to owe as much to Brahmanism as to the ‘pure’ Buddhism they had expected to find in a forest monastery. Although Luang Por would not cater to the superstitious beliefs of the local people, neither was he a fundamentalist, and he was willing to perform one or two of the more benign local ceremonies, as a way to draw people towards the Dhamma.

Ajahn Santacitto, one of those who arrived at Wat Pah Pong looking for a meditation teacher to instruct him in *vipassanā*, received a rude shock on his first day.

“After the meal, a small group of village folk spread a white cloth over their heads, the monks all around me started chanting, and Luang Por began dripping melted candle wax into a bowl of water. After the chanting was over, he sprinkled this ‘holy water’ over the heads of the now uncovered villagers. I was shocked by what seemed to me to be out-and-out superstition. But then my eyes caught Luang Por’s. To my surprise, he had a mischievous grin on his face, like a young lad having a grand old time. I was completely disarmed. But the real point hit home after the ritual finished and he gave a Dhamma talk, when I noticed how attentively the villagers sat listening.”

## KICKSTART

If a monk felt that he had been singled out to receive a particular teaching, it left an especially deep impression. This happened to Ajahn Nyanadhammo during his first Rains Retreat at Wat Pah Pong. At that time, a more senior monk would often seek to engage him in conversation during their return to the monastery after the daily alms-round. As they walked along, this monk would expound on the faults of various monks and spout what seemed an endless stream of complaints. Ajahn Nyanadhammo found the monk conceited and hypocritical, but being junior to him, felt unable to rebuff him politely. By the end of one of these walks, he would arrive back at the monastery feeling annoyed and out of sorts. But one day, as he passed Luang Por Chah's kuti reviewing all the faults of this fault-finding monk, his sour mood dissolved in an instant. A broadly smiling Luang Por, practising his English, looked out and wished him a hearty, 'Good Morning!'

That evening, Ajahn Nyanadhammo went to Luang Por's kuti to offer him a foot massage. When the bell sounded for evening chanting and monks started to leave the kuti, Luang Por told him to continue the massage and asked someone else to extinguish the candles.

"The moon was just coming up and I was listening to the monks chanting. As I massaged his feet, Luang Por sat there silently in the darkness meditating – it was really inspiring – and then suddenly, he lifted up his foot and kicked me in the chest. I fell back on the floor. He pointed at me and said: 'There! One person says something that you don't like and you get upset. Somebody else just says, 'Good morning', and you're happy all day. Don't follow your moods. Don't be attached to other people's words.' "

## YOU CAN GO

Luang Por was habitually reticent on the subject of psychic powers and there are few occasions in which he was clearly seen to demonstrate them. But one such occasion did occur when a certain Australian monk received a letter from home informing him of his father's death, and asking him if he could come back for a visit.

This monk's energy and short temper had earned him the nickname amongst the Thai monks of 'Venerable High Octane'. He was a fiercely intelligent man, who considered those who disagreed with his (often rather cynical) views to be guilty of wishful thinking and unable to face up to the hard truths of life. Although he had great respect for Luang Por, he could be withering about anyone he perceived to be putting their teacher on too high a pedestal. Belief that Luang Por had psychic powers was, to him, a good example of the woolly-mindedness that he found so annoying.

When the monk arrived at Luang Por's kuti, letter in hand, in order to ask for guidance, Luang Por was talking to some other monks, and so he sat down to wait. After a while, Luang Por turned to him and said, 'What would you do if your mother wrote you a letter and invited you to return home for a visit? Could you handle it?' The monk was completely taken aback. He had not mentioned the matter to anyone. He realized that Luang Por was asking if he was confident that he could sustain his practice of the Vinaya outside of the supportive surroundings of the monastery. 'I'll try', he replied. Luang Por said: 'You can go if you want.'

#### THE SMELL IN YOUR BAG

Ven. Aranyabho was another monk with an overly critical mind. After returning from a branch monastery with a familiar litany of complaints, Luang Por said to him:

Aranyabho, you've got dog shit in your shoulder bag, do you realize that? Everywhere you go, you sit down and there's a bad smell. So you think, 'Ugh, this place is no good.' And you pick up your shoulder bag and go off somewhere else. You sit down and there's the bad smell again, and so you get up once more, taking your shoulder bag with you. You never realize that the smell is coming from the dog shit in your shoulder bag, and so you carry it with you wherever you go.

It was a variation on one of Luang Por's favourite teaching stories: the mangy dog who blames wherever he sits down for the itching that torments him. Ven. Aranyabho listened to this blunt admonishment with

a face that was presumably more sheepish than canine. Ven. Varapanyo commented:

“There was never any bad feeling when he talked to people like this, because we knew it came from a pure, loving heart; he was offering us, right then and there, a clear and simple solution to our problems, one which he had obviously practised. His words, and his whole being, simply said, ‘Let go – now.’ ”

## V. KNOWER OF THE WORLDS

### RESULTS OF THE PRACTICE

Although the overwhelming majority of Westerners who entered the monastic life at Wat Pah Pong were male, there were also a small number of Western women who came to train as maechees. Chief amongst these, was an American known by her adopted name Khamfah, who arrived with her husband Paul, after fleeing their home in Laos ahead of the Communist takeover in late 1975. The couple decided to try to stay for five years, with the proviso that, if at any time, both of them wanted to leave, then they would do so; however, in the case that one wanted to go and the other wanted to stay, then they would both carry on and endure through their difficulties. It was challenging for both of them, but they survived the five years.

At the end of every year, Luang Por would allow Maechee Khamfah to go to Wat Pah Nanachat for a few days where she would have the chance to speak to Paul (by then known as Ven. Thitabho). But mostly, their relationship was confined to the odd clandestine note, secreted at an agreed spot in the forest on the maechees’ route to the kitchen. In many ways, it was harder for Maechee Khamfah: as a nun, she had much less access to Luang Por, and, in the Maechee Section, her inspiration could easily waver. But Ven. Thitabho did not find monastic life easy either, and sometimes he would probably have preferred the distance from Luang Por that his wife resented.

By the late 1970s Luang Por had become a more grandfatherly figure. But the old fire and ability to give corrosive admonishments would occa-

sionally resurface. He could also accomplish the effect of a scolding without speaking a word, as he demonstrated one day when he caught Ven. Thitabho breaking a key monastic regulation.

Private supplies of tea, coffee, sugar and so on were forbidden at Wat Pah Pong. Everybody was expected to be content with whatever communal drinks were provided. However, a number of the Western monks – Ven. Thitabho included – persuaded themselves that they were a special case in this respect, and if they were discreet enough about it, boiling a pot of water in the forest and having a cup of tea together was a minor, harmless indulgence. Every now and again, they would meet at Ven. Thitabho's kuti, where an ancient black kettle was secreted.

One day, Ven. Thitabho received a parcel of fine teas from his sister in England. In the late afternoon, he made a small fire in the forest behind his kuti, at a spot where the smoke would not be visible from the path, to enjoy a first cup of the new batch. But when an involuntary shiver passed through his body, he quickly turned around to see a motionless and stonewashed Luang Por watching him. It was the proverbial nightmare come true. Luang Por walked over to the illicit supplies, lifted up his walking stick and knocked over a few jars of tea with a crash, spat on the ground and walked off in silence.

Luang Por spent most of the second half of 1979 overseeing the renovation of the monastery in Bahn Kor where he had spent his first years in the robes. Towards the end of the year, Ven. Thitabho was assigned as his attendant. One day, a group of Thai visitors began to praise the Western monks for their renunciation and dedication. Luang Por agreed, yes, his Western disciples were accomplished, many of them could chant the *Pātimokkha*. ‘They’re all very intelligent,’ he paused dramatically, ‘except for this one’, he pointed to Thitabho, ‘He’s really stupid.’ Afterwards, Luang Por asked Thitabho slyly if he got angry when he treated him like that. Thitabho said, ‘How can you get angry with a mountain?’ Luang Por was delighted. Laughing, he turned to one of the novices by his side, ‘Write that down. Write that down!’

Eventually, the five years were up. In the last few months, Khamfah’s growing sense of isolation in the Maechee Section had been exploited

by a fundamentalist Christian missionary. This had culminated, somewhat bizarrely, in her conversion ('Maybe, she's right', said a deadpan Luang Por, startling Ajahn Sumedho who brought the news). After their departure, ex-Thitabho adopted his wife's faith. The couple sent letters to Western monks lamenting what they called the aridity of Buddhist spirituality, and exulting in what they believed to be a shared sense of Christ's presence. One of their main complaints was that after five years in the wat, they could see no tangible results from their practice. No matter how much they had tried, life had always seemed to remain pretty much the same. These comments were passed on to Luang Por. Then one day, a photo of the couple with their first child arrived in the post. It was shown to Luang Por. He looked at it for a moment and then said, 'At last, they've seen the results of their practice.'

#### NATURE AND NURTURE

Whereas Luang Por had obviously thought that Ven. Thitabho would benefit from blunt or humbling words, he saw others were more in need of attention and nurture. Venerable Varapanyo was a member of this group. As a young monk, Ven. Varapanyo struggled with a craving for sugar, which culminated in him gorging on a packet of candies sent in a care package from home. The lapse propelled him into a frenzy of guilt and self-loathing. He went to confess to Luang Por:

"I blurted out, 'I'm impure, my mind is soiled, I'm no good.' He looked very concerned. 'What is it?' he asked. I told him the story. Naturally, he was amused, and within a few minutes, I realized that he had me laughing. I was very light hearted, the world was no longer about to end; in fact, I had forgotten about my burden. This was one of his most magical gifts. You could feel so burdened and depressed and hopeless, and after being around him for a few minutes it all vanished and you found yourself laughing. Sometimes you only needed to go and sit down at his kuti, be around him as he spoke to others. Even when he was away, I would get a 'contact high' of peacefulness as soon as I got near his kuti to clean up or sweep leaves."

But it was the opportunity to serve as Luang Por's attendant that was to have the most profound effect.

“There was usually a lot of competition for the honour of waiting on him, but I was allowed to go to his kuti for the early morning chores, before dawn. It meant getting up earlier in the chilly mornings, but I was inspired. The more I hung around him, the safer I felt. He would give me little discourses from time to time, keep checking to see how I was doing, ask me about my past, etc. I began to feel, here is somebody unshakeable, like a mountain. ‘To believe in God is to know that somebody somewhere is not stupid.’ It really seemed to me that I had found that somebody; he was to me what you always expected your father, family doctor, priest, teacher, Santa Claus and Superman to be, all rolled into one. He would keep on pulling rabbits out of the hat – teachings, things to do, medicines, whatever – so that the situation began to feel open-ended, like there were unlimited possibilities awaiting me, much different from the dreary path I had imagined for so long.

“So, in the morning I would boil water and bring hot and cold water for him to wash his face. When he came downstairs, I would give him the water and kneel there with a towel, while one of the novices took his false teeth to clean them. Usually he would walk around with the towel afterwards, and let me follow, until he finally gave it to me to hang up. His robes would be made ready to put on for alms-round, but first he would check things out at his kuti, throw some rice to the wild chickens, sit down and talk, drink tea.

“Occasionally, a couple of nuns would come at this time to discuss something. It was always interesting to watch the local monks and nuns when they came to see him. They spoke to him with the utmost deference, almost as if they were terrified of him. With us Westerners, he was usually the kindly old man, though over the years I was to see him play many different roles. He could make you love him or hate him, feel respect, fear, doubt or disgust for him, and he could juggle your mind states around quite rapidly. For me, at that time, he was instilling faith. Those early morning scenes were especially effective: the wat was almost empty, most of the monks having left earlier for the other alms-round routes, and we were limited to about 15 minutes before we had to go, so the situation felt intensified – despite the fact that it was so funny to see the great man

sitting there with his teeth out, all of a sudden looking like a little old Ukrainian grandmother.

“In the afternoons, after sweeping his kuti, emptying his spittoon, and so on, I would sit down for a while, to listen as he spoke to whoever was there, sometimes to talk or maybe be given a cup of tea, but mostly just to be there. After the guests were gone, he took his bath, with a few of us helping him, holding his towel, taking his robe, offering the dry bathing cloth, washing his back and feet, cleaning his sandals.”

As Ven. Varapanyo became more settled and confident, Luang Por started to use him as a figure in his teaching stories. Varapanyo usually filled the role of the fool: sometimes the fool who never got it right, sometimes the fool who sees the light.

“It was getting cold, and a monk who was leaving suggested that his kuti might be a bit more comfortable since it was smaller and less drafty. So I moved. But it was near the wall of the wat and the farmers would pass by with their buffalo in the daytime. This disturbed me because I was still convinced that meditation and noise don’t mix, so after a few days I moved back. Someone noticed of course (the CIA has nothing on the monastic grapevine) and duly reported it to Luang Por. He questioned me about it, and over the years, I was to hear the story many times, expanded and embellished.

“He would often use incidents like this (somewhat tailored to fit his purpose) to teach. He would tell people about learning the mind’s tricks, how it becomes bored and dissatisfied, always wanting something else: ‘Take Varapanyo, for example – he came to Wat Pah Pong and was sitting in his kuti, but he wasn’t happy. He moved all his things and went to live in the other kuti, but he wasn’t happy there either. So, he thought the first kuti was better, and he moved back there.’ He always told the stories in a very gentle and funny way, everyone would have a good laugh, and he would make his point: it’s the mind that does it all; know your mind.”

March and April were the cruellest months for hot weather. The Western monks would drag themselves around, occasionally lapsing into day-dreams of a cooling thunderstorm.

“The heat was a torment with the fatigue and discomfort it brought me. One afternoon, somebody brought iced drinks from town. I drank several glasses, and felt so relieved that I soon started thinking, I could have my family donate an ice machine to Wat Pah Pong, it could be run on the generator a few hours each day and we would always have ice. It seemed like a perfectly valid thought to me. Finally, I began to realize that the Buddha lived in the forest and did his ascetic practices without our modern conveniences such as ice, so I could probably endure and survive without it. I later told Luang Por of this episode I had gone through in my mind. It became one of his ‘teaching stories’ about how to contemplate situations to eliminate unnecessary suffering: ‘Varapanyo was living in the forest, and the hot season came. He was so hot, he was really unhappy. All he could think about was ice. But then he contemplated, “When the Buddha lived in the forest, did he have ice? No! He didn’t.” This was wisdom arising. So then he became happy, his problem was resolved.’”

#### NOBODY KNOWS

Luang Por could be so acute and penetrating about the general ways of the world that the Western monks could be surprised at how little interest he had in the details of that world, and how little knowledge. Nevertheless, he occasionally showed curiosity about the West and its culture and customs. One day, he asked Ajahn Sumedho what hippies were, and after listening to the description, said that it sounded like they would make good monks. Ven. Varapanyo recalled:

“Occasionally, Luang Por would ask about Western life and customs, about my past experiences, about science (astronomy was usually interesting to the Thais). He was disinterested, in that he obviously wasn’t hankering after anything, yet he was very interested because he all of a sudden had on his hands several of these people from a part of the world he knew hardly anything about, and he cared about us ...

“One thing he never showed any interest in was politics, either domestic or international. One day, sometime after Nixon was re-elected, he said, ‘Nixon ran away with it’ – a visitor must have told him, and he just passed it on to me with that one line. And then, one time when a few of us went to see him, he said, ‘CIA: nobody knows who they are. Who is the CIA?’

Nobody knows.' And that was the extent of the political discussion I can remember having with him."

#### PARENTAL CAUTION

At one point in the Ordination ceremony, the applicant is asked in the midst of the Sangha, '*Anuññātosi mātāpitūhi?*' 'Do you have your parents' permission?' And he replies, '*Āma bhante.*' 'Yes, Venerable Sir.' It is fortunate that a candidate's failure to admit to parental opposition at this juncture does not invalidate the ceremony, for many Western monks were unable to gain the blessing of their parents until long after their admission into the Sangha. Some monks endured years of rejection by their families. Others received regular letters begging them to come home – impossible to discard unopened, but heart-wrenching to read beyond the first few lines. For their part, some parents were agonized by thoughts of their son as a brainwashed member of a strange cult in the heart of a steamy jungle; others felt hurt at the rejection of their own values and religious traditions and grieved at the loss of the dreams they'd cherished for their son. Even those parents who respected and supported their son's choice – the numbers of whom probably exceed those that did not – had to cope with the sorrow of knowing it might be years before they saw him again.

Some monks succumbed to the pressure of emotional blackmail. One was tricked into returning to England by a telegram falsely informing him that his mother had had a heart attack. For others, when their practice faltered, knowing that their parents disapproved of what they were doing made it harder for them to justify to themselves the pain they were causing. Lack of parental support was often a factor – sometimes a decisive one – when monks afflicted by doubts, discouragement, or sensual desires were considering a return to the lay-life. However, in almost every case of those monks who stayed on, their parents eventually came round. At last, a conciliatory letter would arrive, announcing a visit or offering a plane ticket for a visit home, expressing acceptance of their son's way of life.

Luang Por went out of his way to welcome the parents of his Western disciples to Wat Pah Pong. The warmth and kindness he showed to them

was dialled up to such a dazzling intensity that few could resist. Most parents would be thoroughly charmed and their worries put to rest. Even the most sceptical of parents would show signs of thawing. ‘I must say, he’s certainly got something about him’, they’d say after meeting him, or admit, ‘Well, he does seem like a very nice man.’ Also, they saw positive changes in their sons which they could not help but feel proud of. They were impressed by the great reverence with which the monks were treated by people on every level of Thai society. Even if in their heart of hearts they hoped that their son might someday give up the robe, at least, for the time being, their minds were at peace.

In the early 1980s, there began an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to start a maechee community at Wat Pah Nanachat. A young woman from Hong Kong, Sister Suddhamma, became one of its first members. Her parents were extremely upset and the mother wrote at regular intervals, imploring her daughter to come home. The nun wrote back, politely refusing and asking for time and understanding. On receiving it, the mother immediately replied with a threat to kill herself. The nun became very anxious, not really believing the threat, not wanting to return to Hong Kong, and yet unsure of the right thing to do. Luang Por advised her not to disrobe but to invite her mother to come to visit. He said, ‘She feels this antipathy because, not having seen for herself what you’re doing, she’s imagining a lot of bad things.’ He made a comparison:

To tell you the truth, I was like that once – but with cheese. Ugggh! I hated the smell of it! It was awful. When I went to the West everybody reeked of the stuff. But I got closer and closer to it, and then one day they gave me some. I thought I might as well give it a try. Mmm ... it was pretty good. Now I think it’s delicious. These days I eat more than the Westerners do. I used to think it smelted like chicken shit, and now I like it. So stay. It won’t be long and your mother will come.

Which she did. And after the initial suspicion and paranoia had worn off, she began to understand, if not condone, her daughter’s decision and returned to Hong Kong with her mind much calmed.

Another occasion on which Luang Por's skills in diplomacy were displayed, came with the arrival of Randy (later Ajahn Kittisaro), a champion wrestler and Rhodes Scholar from Tennessee. During his summer break from Oxford, Randy had travelled to Thailand to research Thai Buddhism. There he met Luang Por and became inspired by him to become a monk. Randy's parents were shocked and deeply worried. They flew out to Thailand to save him from brainwashing and the ruin of his future. On meeting Luang Por, however, their concerns dissolved. They were impressed at the changes they saw in their son: a new-found self-discipline, calmness and resolve. Luang Por put forward Randy's novice Ordination in order that his parents could be present to see their son enter the Sangha before they returned home. On the morning of the ceremony, they went into town and bought food to offer to the Sangha of Wat Pah Nanachat as a celebratory offering on an auspicious day.

#### A SNAKE IN THE HOUSE

Over the years, many Western laypeople came to stay at Wat Pah Pong. A large number arrived without any intention of becoming monks or nuns, but simply with the wish to meet and receive teachings from Luang Por, and to participate for some time in the life of the monastic community. Usually, Luang Por would delegate basic teaching duties to a senior Western monk, but every now and again he would give a Dhamma talk to the lay guests, or answer their questions.

It is sometimes alleged that monks are dismissive of lay practice, and that great masters reserve the most profound teachings for those who have made a commitment to monastic life. This was not the case with Luang Por. Western lay guests with a sincere interest in practice energized him. Indeed, monks would become excited if they knew that Luang Por was going to give a Dhamma talk to the foreign lay guests, because of the profundity of the Dhamma that they might expect to hear.

One talk, subsequently published as *Living with the Cobra*, gives a good idea of the flavour of these teachings. In it, Luang Por compared mental states, both positive and negative, to poisonous snakes. Identifying with a mental state he said was like letting yourself be bitten by a cobra. The

separation from the truth of things that results from that identification is like death from the cobra's poison.

All mental states are like cobras. If nothing obstructs their path, they just glide along their way. Even though they possess venom, it's inside them. They are of no danger to us as long as we don't go near them. They just do what cobras naturally do.

Intelligent people let go of attachment to everything, both good and bad. They let go of both what they like and what they dislike. It's as if we were to release a cobra from captivity: it would slither away taking its poison with it. And that is the way we release mental states – we release the good and bad with an awareness of their nature. We don't touch them, don't take hold of them, because we don't want anything; we don't want good or bad, heavy or light, pleasure or pain. A conclusion is reached, and lucid calm is firmly established.

He taught that the path of practice was founded on the development of mindfulness and alertness. When these two factors were mature, the wisdom faculty would arise naturally, and meditators would then be wakeful day and night. Practitioners would be close to the Buddha at all times.

The term 'arising of wisdom' means that, through clearly seeing how all phenomena arise and fall according to causes and conditions, meditators abandon attachment to them as self or adjuncts of self.

When things arise, we know; when they cease, we know. When there is happiness, we know; and when there is unhappiness, we know. Once we know, we don't take possession of that happiness or unhappiness. When there is no sense of possession of those feelings, then all that remains is the simple process of arising and ceasing. You let it follow its natural course because there's nothing there worth attaching to.

At this time, Luang Por had been reading Zen Buddhist texts and gave his own view on the relationship between Nibbāna and samsāra discussed in them.

The Buddha said that Nibbāna is cessation. Where does that cessation take place? Well, it's like a fire. It's extinguished wherever it springs up, wherever it's burning. You cool something at the point where it's hot. It's the same with Nibbāna and samsāra. They lie in the same place.

The Buddha taught us to put out the fire of samsāra that is inner turmoil. Bringing inner turmoil to cessation is called putting out the fire. External fires are hot, and when they've been put out, there is coolness. The inner heat of greed, hatred and delusion are also fires. Think about it. When sexual desire arises in the mind, it's hot, isn't it? If anger arises, it's hot; if delusion arises, it's hot. It's this heat which the Buddha called 'the fires'. When fires spring up, there is heat; when they are extinguished, there is coolness ...

Nibbāna is the state that cools the heat. The Buddha called it peace, the cessation of the wheel of birth and death.

Then, at the end of the discourse, Luang Por descended from the exalted level in which he had been dwelling, to address some warm personal words to the elderly English woman who was the recipient of the talk:

When you first arrived, you cried. When I saw your tears, I felt happy. Why was that? Because I knew you were going to be studying the true Dhamma. If no tears flow, then you won't see the Dhamma, because the fluid in tears is bad stuff. You have to let it all out before you can feel at ease.

So please take this Dhamma away with you and put it into practice. Practise in order to transcend suffering. Die before death and be peaceful and at ease.

But occasionally Luang Por could treat foreign guests with great abruptness. One day a Western woman arrived at Luang Por's kuti while he was talking to some of the monks. He asked one of the Western monks present to ask her what she wanted. The monk translated, 'She's asking permission to stay. She would like to receive teachings from Luang Por.'

Luang Por scowled, ‘Tell her that there’s no teaching here, all I do is torment people.’

After shocking everyone in earshot, Luang Por relented and the woman was led away to the Maechee Section. Luang Por gave no reason for his words, and each person was left to speculate on why Luang Por thought this particular woman would benefit from such a welcome. For the Western monks, living with loose ends such as these when they weren’t quite sure what just happened, was a normal part of the life at Wat Pah Pong.

On another occasion, a European academic arrived with a questionnaire. He asked Luang Por through a translator, ‘Why do you practise? How do you practise? What are the results of your practice?’

Luang Por replied:

Why do you eat? How do you eat? What are the results of your eating?

Luang Por smiled, the scholar frowned, and asked for an explanation.

Think about it. Why do you eat? Because you’re hungry and if you don’t eat you will suffer. Why do we practise? Because we’re hungry. Food relieves the pain of physical hunger and Dhamma practice relieves mental and spiritual hunger. If the mind is suffering, then you must use Dhamma to alleviate it. How do we practise? Just as we put food into our stomach, so must we put Dhamma into our heart. What are the results of our practice? Well, it’s just like eating. The results of eating are that your stomach is full of food. The results of practising are that your heart is full of Dhamma.

## VI. THE TWAIN SHALL MEET

### WAT PAH NANACHAT

By 1975, there were almost twenty Western monks at Wat Pah Pong – about a quarter of the resident Sangha. This rapid and significant influx brought with it inevitable tensions. Although the organization of the monastery and a common faith and confidence in Luang Por kept the situation workable, minor but niggling conflicts between the Thais and the ‘farangs’ became increasingly common. The first generation of Western monks was predominantly North American. These were young men used to an informal, unregimented life, to expressing their feelings about things freely, using their initiative. Many of them had robust personalities. In an era when travel to Southeast Asia was a lot more daunting than it is today, the path to a forest in Northeast Thailand was not an easy or straightforward one to take. Having to conform to the Vinaya, to many rules and regulations that they could not always see the reason for, could easily provoke the rebellious side of their nature.

The Thai monks, almost all brought up in local villages, could be dazzled by the exoticness of the Westerners. They admired them for their renunciation, but were puzzled, amused and occasionally repelled by their gaucheness and failures to govern emotion. Sometimes, the Thai monks were made uncomfortable by what they saw as the Westerners’ over-familiar manner towards Luang Por, or else envied their easy access to him.

These tensions did not run particularly deep; essentially, they were little more than ripples on a placid forest pool. In the monastery as a whole, attitudes of tolerance and goodwill towards the foreign monks usually far outweighed any negativity. But even so, Luang Por was aware that certain changes needed to be made. His solution was to reduce the number of Western monks at Wat Pah Pong by establishing a branch monastery especially for them.

Problems at Wat Pah Pong were not the only reason for his decision. Luang Por saw that, in future, many of the Western monks would want to return to the West and establish monasteries there. Before that happened, he wanted them to gain experience in running their own affairs. In

particular, he wanted to train Ajahn Sumedho in the role of abbot of a monastery. It would also be good to have a place where the Westerners could practise together, where the teaching would be in English, and where the food could be blander and more suited to a Western palate. Monks could alternate between spending time with him and living at this new monastery. He started to consider the idea aloud.

At first, Ajahn Sumedho, the prospective leader of the new community, was not enthusiastic. He had no wish to take on such a responsibility. But as time passed, he began to consider his resistance to be selfish and decided to trust in Luang Por's judgement.

That hot season of 1975, Ajahn Sumedho's large, cast iron alms-bowl developed a rust patch and needed to be re-fired. Luang Por gave permission to him and four other foreign monks to walk over to the cremation forest of Bung Wai village, some nine kilometres to the northwest of Wat Pah Pong. There they would find a plentiful supply of wood and could combine a bowl firing expedition with a short retreat.

For many years, a group of villagers from Bahn Bung Wai had been walking over to Wat Pah Pong on every Observance Day for a day and night of Dhamma practice. They were excited at the idea of having monks come to live outside their own village. Soon, a deputation went to see Luang Por and asked him to give permission for the Western monks to spend the Rains Retreat in the Bung Wai cremation forest. They would build huts for the monks to live in. It was an opportune moment and Bung Wai was not far away. Luang Por agreed.

From the first days of the new venture, Luang Por would make frequent visits. He offered his assistance in various ways. He used his influence to get a dirt road cut right around the forested area so as to give clearly defined limits to the monastery's land. When the jealous abbot of a local village monastery started to pen anonymous letters to the authorities slandering the Western monks, Luang Por, with great tact, chaired a meeting in which the problem was resolved. Ajahn Sumedho, Wat Pah Nanachat's first abbot, felt grateful for the support as he strived to get to grips with a role he did not find easy.

“I could always go to see Luang Por, and he came here quite often. Also, he knew I’d have to learn from trial and error. I remember one time feeling in such a state of despair. All these feelings of being responsible and of being totally inadequate to deal with them. He helped me to get some perspective on this feeling of being burdened by responsibilities. I remember one time going to see him in a state of despair, and he sensed it immediately and he said, ‘Now you know what it’s like to be an abbot. You thought it meant having a triangular cushion to lean against and the key to the larder.’ And he laughed.”

Ven. Varapanyo recounted his memories of his first Rains Retreat at Wat Pah Nanachat:

“On the first night of the Rains Retreat, Ajahn Sumedho told us what the schedule would be – the emphasis would clearly be on formal meditation practice ... and encouraged us to just do the practice as it was set up, without second thoughts, and that if we did so, mindfulness would become habitual, and we’d find that we’d be able to live our lives out mindfully. That sounded reasonable to me, and quite wonderful – what more could a person ask for, really? But it still seemed a distant goal.

“There was also more of a harmony of purpose than I’d felt before – no temporary ordinations, kids who were in the monastery only because their parents had sent them – and easy communication with each other, without cultural barriers that often could lead to misunderstanding and bad feeling. This is not to say that everything was perfect, of course. We had much to learn about living with each other, and Ajahn Sumedho had many trials and lessons about being a teacher waiting for him. Still, the overall feeling was very good, and there were many factors that hadn’t been present in past situations in other places.

“The retreat went on, the schedule intensified. It wasn’t easy, but it was good ... Luang Por would make his usual jokes, calling it ‘Wat Pah Woon Wai’ ('Forest Monastery of Confusion') or ‘Wat Pah Amerikawat’, but he obviously thought it was a good thing, and the lay people who came did too. Yet I doubt anyone could have envisioned how the place would develop in the near future. That first Rains Retreat there were only nine or ten kutis and two *kratop* (grass huts with no floor, just a bed on the

ground). Ajahn Sumedho lived in a small bamboo kuti with a grass roof, and we had a tiny grass-roofed Dhamma Hall with a dirt floor.”

Luang Por did not intercede in the daily running of Wat Pah Nanachat. The monks were free to build the monastery as they saw fit. They designed the Dhamma Hall themselves, and its layout – with the raised sitting area for the monks running along the side of the hall rather than across the front – was a departure from the norm. Luang Por would often recommend visitors who came to pay respects to him at Wat Pah Pong to go to visit Wat Pah Nanachat as well. One of the first groups to arrive was Bangkok’s Radio 01 Dhamma Group. Every year, a fleet of buses filled with pilgrims from this group would travel upcountry to visit various monasteries, receive teachings and make offerings. Now they added Wat Pah Nanachat to their itinerary and supported it generously for many years.

Luang Por showed some concern that the strong-willed Westerners would find it hard to live together in harmony. Whenever he spoke to the Wat Pah Nanachat Sangha, he emphasized the importance of mutual respect and goodwill. He taught that the protocols governing relationships between monks based on seniority prevented old, worldly speech habits from resurfacing, and insisted that they not be relaxed. Honorifics were always to be used: a junior monk’s name must always be preceded by the prefix ‘Tan’; a senior monk’s by ‘Ajahn’. Luang Por maintained that without creating an atmosphere of trust and respect in their monastery, meditation practices would not bear fruit. The conventions of Right Speech had a part to play in achieving this goal.

Ajahn Amaro was one of the first of the Westerners who came for a visit and ended up becoming a monk.

“I found a group of Westerners like myself, with very similar backgrounds, who were living in the forest doing Buddhist meditation practice. And they all seemed remarkably cheerful. When they explained their way of life and the basis of their practice, it made perfect sense to me ... They explained that by living a life which is disciplined, simple and harmless, one could discover the true freedom that lies within us. Upon hearing

their words, my immediate reaction was, ‘How could I have been so stupid not to have seen this before?’”

### THREE TIERS

A three-tiered training was developed for foreign nationals seeking to become monks. After spending some time as lay meditators in Wat Pah Pong or Wat Pah Nanachat, those who requested permission to join the Sangha were, if accepted, given the white robes of the lay renunciant, or postulant, in a short ceremony marked by a formal commitment to the Eight Precepts. As postulants, they acted as monastery attendants and absorbed the basics of the monastic training through proximity to the monks and by acts of service.

After some months in white, their second step was to enter the Sangha as a novice monk (*sāmañera*). In the year allotted for novice training, they would lead a life very similar to that of the monks but without the pressure and requirements of the Vinaya rules. Once the year had passed, applicants considered ready by their mentors would be admitted into the bhikkhu Sangha through the ceremony of *Upasampadā*. For the first five years of their training, junior monks would alternate between living with Luang Por, living at Wat Pah Nanachat and living at other branch monasteries. As long as Luang Por’s health permitted, every stage of the process, every movement between monasteries, was either initiated by him or else given his blessing. In the last years of his debilitating illness, this power devolved to the abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat.

The Western monks appreciated the sense that Luang Por was always aware of what they were doing and had their best interests at heart. Often, he would turn up at Wat Pah Nanachat unannounced (although it must be said that in pre-mobile phone days, this was more of a monastic norm than an exception). Ven. Jotiko wrote in a letter to his family:

“Luang Por plays everything by ear so he might drop by for a visit next week or so. We heard he is pleased about the Dhamma Hall project, and he told the laypeople that the foreigners need a lot of cakes. The next day we had a lot. He always plays with our greed like that. He is always throwing curves at us to keep us on our toes, but that is the only way to

understand our nature. See the extremes, and if wisdom comes, then you know the middle path.”

#### OUT ON A LIMB

Most of the Western monks wanted to be close to Luang Por, but accepted that their training would include spells away from him at Wat Pah Nanachat and other branch monasteries. Life at a branch was usually a mixed experience. Western monks were a novelty in the rural Isan of the mid-1970s. Being the single foreign monk in a monastery brought with it a special, almost celebrity status. Some found this amusing, others distracting. Learning the language – one of the main goals of training at a branch monastery – was not an easy task as there were, in fact, two languages to navigate. Casual conversation would usually be conducted in Isan dialect ('as thick as yoghurt', one monk complained) with central Thai used on more formal occasions.

Not understanding much of what was going on around them could be stressful in a culture where few things were planned far in advance, and everyone was expected to be on their toes and ready to adapt to whatever came up. The presence of teenage novices, with all their adolescent energy, could also be challenging. The Sangha at many branch monasteries included a number of sons of local supporters, sent by their parents for the abbot to straighten out. The need to keep these lads busy, meant that work projects were a common feature of life at a branch monastery. A young Swedish monk, Ven. Natthiko, gave a sense of the atmosphere in a letter:

“All this work is exhausting some days. One evening, sitting after a long day’s work, I was overwhelmed by sleepiness and just fell asleep bent forward with my head on my chest. I didn’t even wake up at the bell. It was a hilarious situation: me slowly coming to life while they waited to start chanting. The monks knew how sensitive I’ve become here to being laughed at, but a novice or two couldn’t restrain themselves and soon most of the Sangha was roaring with laughter, including the Ajahn. It was so bad it was good.”

Life at a small branch monastery could also be very enjoyable. The Thai emphasis on social harmony and the conventions of non-confrontation that underpin it, could make for a refreshing change from Wat Pah Nanachat, where not all of the more individualist Westerners ranked emollient social skills amongst their spiritual goals. Many made good friends at branch monasteries and maintained contact with them over the following years. Others developed a much richer idea of the monk's life, the running of a monastery and the relationship between a wat and local communities. One monk was clearly revelling in life at a branch monastery, when he wrote:

"Part of what I love about being a monk in Thailand is this simplicity: walking barefoot through the village each morning, the balmy weather which makes me feel safe and comfortable, and the simple, physical chores. It's much easier to be comfortable in my body and be content within the simplicity of the monastic form. These characteristics of contentment and simplicity seem like basic matters, but I often come to think that they're really what life's all about."

But even with the occasional epiphany, most of the Westerners were in agreement that, all in all, life at a branch monastery was a humbling experience. In the words of Ven. Natthiko:

"I know it's good for me – it hurts in all the right places."

Although some of the Western monks found that their meditation practice progressed while at a branch monastery, this was by no means always the case. Luang Por was aware of this, but it did not seem to overly concern him. The long-term effects of the training that he was trying to provide were not always measurable by short-term progress in meditation. The penetration of the Four Noble Truths was always the overarching goal, and a gradual and comprehensive training in all areas of the monk's life was the path.

#### YOU HAVE TO STOP TO KEEP UP

Formal entry into the monastic order is effected through the ceremony of *Upasampadā*. This ceremony is presided over by a senior monk, designated the *upajjhāya* or preceptor, who is empowered to receive the new monk

into the Sangha and is required to take responsibility for his welfare and training. The relationship between the preceptor and his disciple is modelled on that of father and son. Luang Por became a preceptor in 1975, and, over the next six years, fourteen non-Thais entered the Sangha with him as their preceptor.\*

At the conclusion of an Ordination ceremony for Western monks, Luang Por would usually take the opportunity of this gathering of the Western Sangha to give a Dhamma talk which would encompass the whole monastic training from its most basic foundations to the ultimate goal of the Holy Life. On one such occasion, he began – as was his custom – by emphasizing the importance of living together in harmony, of how important it was that the foreign monks related to each other according to the conventions laid down in the Vinaya. He instructed them that, as a group of *samanas*, they should put behind them all consciousness of different skin colour, language and culture, and look on each other with kindness and respect, as companions in the Holy Life. They should train themselves in speaking to each other mindfully:

If any problem comes up in the group, then speak about it in a skilful way: ‘I see it like this.’ ‘I feel like this.’ And then listen to what the other person has to say.

The Western monks should learn to listen with an open mind, both to the words of others and to their own thoughts. When a view or opinion arose in their mind, they should be aware of it as simply that – a view, an opinion – and remind themselves that, as yet, they did not, in fact, know whether it accurately reflected the truth of things. The mind was the measure of the effectiveness of their practice. If they were experiencing mental suffering, that meant that they had deviated from the Dhamma and allowed craving to arise. In community life, devotion to the Dhamma and Vinaya would dissolve all sense of conflict and bring a feeling of unity in diversity.

Luang Por seemed to share the widespread concern in Thailand at that time that Buddhism was undergoing a sharp decline. He lamented the fact that so many people were going to monasteries merely in search

\*Seven of these monks remain in robes in 2017: Munindo, Bodhipalo, Amaro, Nyanadhammo, Jayasaro, Vajiro, Khemanando.

of protective amulets or to be sprinkled with holy water. He opined that, ‘The true Dhamma is disappearing, it’s seldom seen; few people are practising.’ The Westerners seemed like a breath of fresh air. The sacrifices they had made to spend their lives as monks in the forest gave new inspiration to many people.

So with the world in its present state, I feel that for all of you to have come from so many countries to join in the training here is a singular thing. It’s uplifting for the laypeople to see you coming from abroad to become monks, and to see that you can eat sticky rice, you can speak Thai, you can speak Lao, that you are able to endure life in such a poor and backward place. That’s why, when I went to London, I said to people there that people come to Wat Pah Pong for a doctorate in Buddhism. What I mean by that is that you come here intent on genuine transformation. To me, it’s as if all of you have died and then been reborn; everything here is different from your former life. You have had to get used to the weather, the food, all kinds of things. In order to become monks, you have strived to overcome all these obstacles including learning the language and chanting for the Ordination ceremony. Your efforts are inspiring.

Nevertheless, he cautioned them, the Ordination ceremony was simply a convention. It didn’t, in itself, change them for the better. And it should be remembered that, ultimately, all such forms were empty:

Once you’ve taken the robe as a monk or a novice, you’re still the same person as you were before. Postulant, novice, monk: it’s all the same person. So don’t have ideas about becoming anything. The things we are practising with are, at every stage, the same old things. Truly speaking, there are no Thais and no Westerners here at all; there are just the elements of earth, water, fire and air. Nothing has any intrinsic existence. There are merely the conventions that we have created.

The most important thing was the training of the mind.

Don’t follow after your thoughts. Try to keep looking at your mind. Through my own reflections, I’ve come to see that things

which run in a circle are the fastest of all. You can't keep up with them. You have to just sit there calmly and watch them run. Don't run with them. When they come to entice you, don't get up from your seat. And then when your mind stops, you will become aware of many different things. If you run after your thoughts, you won't be able to keep up with them; but if you stop, then you will. It's strange. This applies to all mind objects, which are just the way they are, in accordance with causes and conditions.

Transcending the world required an understanding of what 'the world' truly was and what it meant to be 'born into the world'.

Wherever there is a cause, there will be a result – it is the way of the world. There are causes and results; there is birth, and there is death; there is pleasure, and there is pain; there is love, and there is hate. The existence of all these things is called 'the world'.

Identification with any of these phenomena was the profound meaning of 'birth'. Birth formed the cause for a proliferation of conditions, and then, inevitably, death. Birth and death were inseparable, he said. Every single person who dies has experienced birth. To determine the Middle Way of practice, it was necessary to bear the end in mind.

The highest teaching of the Buddha is to put things down – take hold of them and then put them down. Pick them up to see what they are, and when you know, then lay them down again. In the end, that's the way it has to be with everything: you have to put it all down. When you truly know all the things in your mind, then you put them down as a matter of course. If you don't, and it's 'This is mine', 'That is mine', then you've got it wrong. If you really understand something, then you put it down. The teachings of the Buddha mean an end, an end without remainder. Whatever there is must be brought to a conclusion, to a complete end. The term '*khīnāsavo*'\* means one who has come to an end of

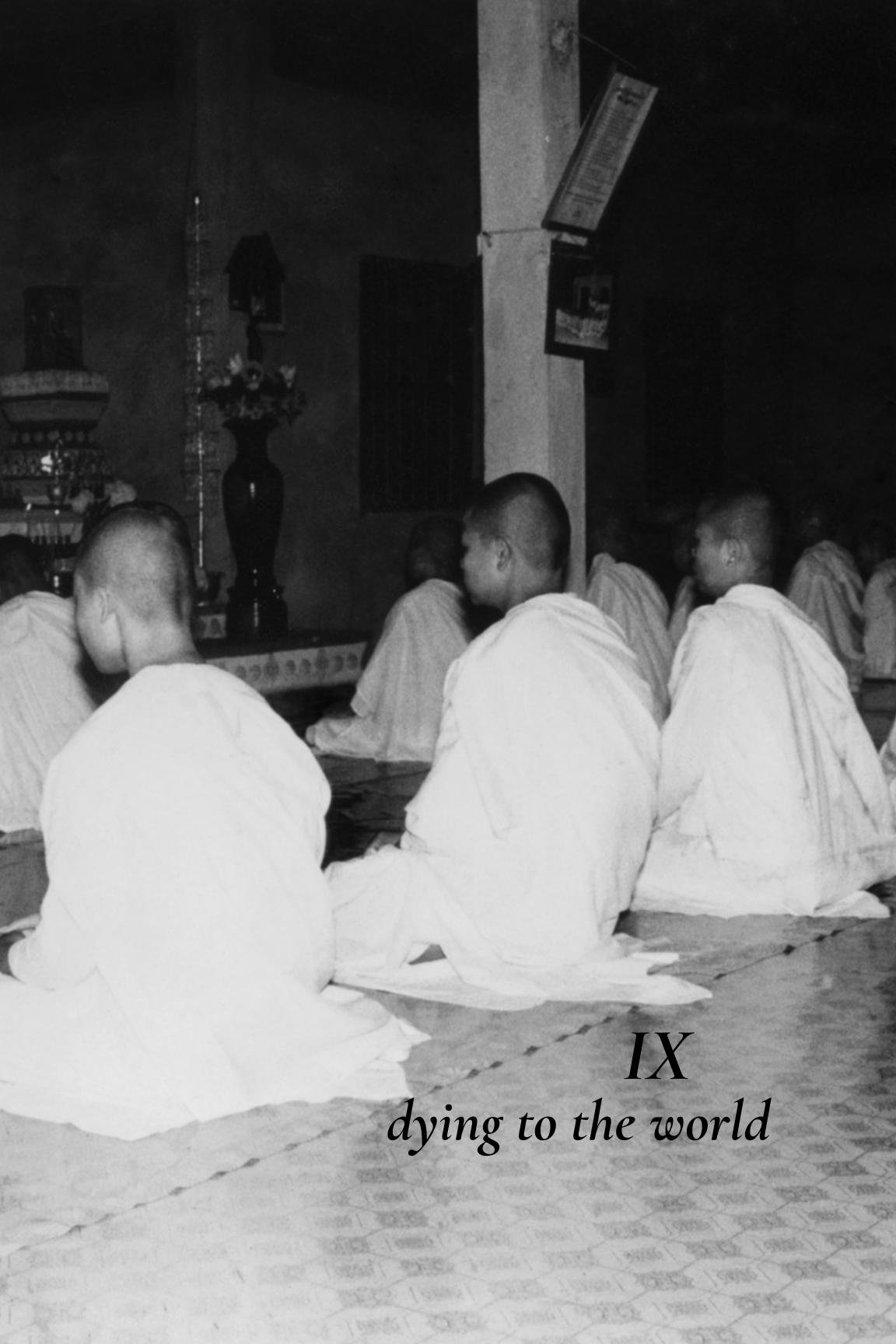
\*An epithet for an arahant.

‘outflows’\*. Know the good as good and then put it down; know evil as evil and then put it down.

Eventually, the teachings lead to an ending: knowing the cause you lay down the cause, knowing the effect you lay down the effect. So, having done that, then where do you dwell? Beyond cause and effect; beyond birth and death. You abide there, where things are concluded, where they have come to an end. There is nothing there, the mind is at peace in the absence of cause and effect, birth and death, pleasure and pain. In that peace, there is no cause and effect, because the mind has gone beyond them. It is our ultimate aim in practice. The Buddha taught just this. What remains is for us to travel to that point. The Buddha has provided a boat and oars and left them for us to make use of. If we start to row, then the boat will move; if we don’t, then the boat will remain motionless ... The Buddha is the one who tells us what’s what. He cannot do the practice for us. That is our responsibility.

\*Pali: ‘āsavā’. Literally: ‘effluents’ or ‘fermentations’. Defilements of the mind which obstruct liberation. The traditional list includes four: 1) sensuality, 2) views, 3) becoming, and 4) ignorance.





**IX**  
*dying to the world*

*Those who are ever vigilant, who discipline themselves day and night and are  
ever intent upon Nibbāna – their defilements fade away.*

*Dhp 226*

# *Dying to the World*

*Maechee Training*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Some five years after his enlightenment, the Buddha established an order of female monastics known as *bhikkhunīs*. The Theravada branch of this order flourished in India and Sri Lanka before falling into a period of decline and finally becoming extinct around 1000 CE, after an illustrious 1,500-year history. In light of the Buddha's stipulation that Ordination required induction into a pre-existing community of bhikkhunīs, revival of the defunct order was deemed impossible.

There is no evidence that the Bhikkhunī Order ever established a significant presence in Southeast Asia. Without a bhikkhunī lineage to perpetuate, the Buddhist cultures of that region eventually saw the emergence of indigenous, female renunciant orders. References to white-robed *maechee* ('holy women'), in the kingdom of Siam may be found in the seventeenth-century accounts of Dutch and French travellers, at which time they seemed to have become a well-established feature of the society.\*

\*“They listen to sermons every day and they spend much time praying in the temples. Their principal activity is to serve the monks, prepare their food and to supply their needs by continual almsgiving. They visit the poor and the sick and devote themselves assiduously to rendering to their fellow-creatures all the good offices that charity can inspire. They enjoy all the same privileges as the monks and are no less respected. Everybody bows down to them and they bow only to monks and pagodas. They are called ‘nang chy’, which means ‘holy woman’.

For women with a monastic vocation and an aspiration to realize liberation, the maechee form is far from ideal. The maechees' relatively basic moral code – they live by the Eight Upāsikā Precepts – means that they cannot draw upon the sophisticated support and protection for their practice that is provided by the Bhikkhunī Vinaya. Maechees are not alms-mendicants, and the lack of a tradition directly traceable to the Buddha has meant that their order has never enjoyed the same respect and prestige in society at large as the Bhikkhu Sangha.

Nevertheless, over the centuries there seems no doubt that a great many women have led happy and fulfilling lives as maechees. During the twentieth century, a number of them, most notably Luang Pu Mun's disciple Maechee Gaew, gained great renown for their spiritual prowess. Others have excelled in the study of Pali and the Abhidhamma\*. The establishment of a national maechee organization in the 1960s, together with advances in maechee education and training over the past decades, have done much to raise standards throughout the country.

Over the past several years, an international movement to revive the Bhikkhunī Order has gathered pace with a new generation of scholars asserting that there are legitimate grounds on which the traditional objections to revival may be dismissed. These arguments have not, however, been considered convincing enough by the elders of the Thai Bhikkhu Sangha to sanction any change in their opposition to the movement, and as yet, no strong lobby has emerged to persuade it to change its mind. At present, the form that female monasticism in Thailand will take in future decades is difficult to predict.

They have a place set aside for them in the pagodas and at the great ceremonies. They are much in demand for the funerals of mandarins, to which they go in order as if in a procession, and their attendance at these ceremonies is always liberally rewarded." (*The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam* by Nicolas Gervaise, 1688.)

\*The body of texts that systematizes the teachings found in the Buddha's discourses.

## II. FOREST NUNS

### THE FIRST MAE CHEES

Not long after the founding of Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por Chah gave permission for the establishment of a maechee community. By doing so, he sought to provide a training within existing norms for women with a monastic vocation which would provide them as much support as possible for their progress along the path to liberation.

Luang Por treated the maechees as forest ascetics: they were expected to live a very frugal life, get up at 3.00 a.m. every morning for a session of chanting and meditation and to eat only one meal a day like the monks. Significantly, Luang Por referred to the maechees as ‘*samaṇas*’, a term of great respect usually only applied to monks. He encouraged them to constantly remind themselves that they were *samaṇas* and to act accordingly.

Everyone here – monks, novices and maechees – are *samaṇas*.

Everyone should know the duties of a *samaṇa*, and not get caught up in either of the two extremes of fruitless asceticism or sensual indulgence.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the vigorous style of practice developed by Luang Por at Wat Pah Pong – a sort of take-no-prisoners campaign against the defilements – extended to the maechees. They were given no exemptions and shared all the privations of the monks. Maechee Boonyu reminisced:

“One of the maechees had stomach pains and headaches. She wanted to go to see a doctor. Luang Por didn’t give permission. He said, ‘Sit and look at it. Concentrate on the area that hurts. If your head aches, then concentrate on your head until it splits apart. When you’ve got no head left, there’ll be nothing to hurt.’ That’s how it was in those days. We endured to that extent. It was no use crying out to see a doctor.

“When there was nothing to eat with the sticky rice, we would just dip lumps of rice in salt or fish sauce. Luang Por said, ‘Don’t get attached to the taste of the food. Don’t give it any consideration. Look on food

as medicine. Eat enough to maintain your body for the coming day.' So we taught ourselves that food was just medicine, and we came to truly believe it to be so. We believed in Luang Por's words, and we developed in the Dhamma. Our bodies and minds were light; there were no obstacles throughout the day. It was easy to practise. That's how he taught us, and as a result we could let go. It was marvellous. Each one of us tried to follow what he taught us, to be tractable and not stubborn in our ways."

Luang Por created a unique vinaya for the Wat Pah Pong maechees. He supplemented the basic Eight Precepts, which they received at their Ordination, with a number of the ascetic *dhutāṅga* practices kept by the monks, and a detailed set of monastic regulations. Although this vinaya still fell far short of that of the bhikkhunī, it provided a strong foundation for practice and let the maechees feel a wholesome pride in themselves as monastics with a distinctive culture and form.

There were, nevertheless, many challenges for the maechees to overcome that the monks were spared. Their duties in the kitchen consisted of activities so closely associated with their former lives that they could easily act as an obstacle to developing a sense of themselves as renunciates; the maechees' possession of small sums of money (usually offered to them by family members and lay supporters for personal needs) also undermined their feeling of having completely left the lay world. But these limitations of the form were generally given little thought by the maechees. They were grateful for what was being made freely available to them: the chance to train in a monastery under the guidance of a great master. It was a wonderful opportunity, and they tried to make the best of it.

#### DEBT OF GRATITUDE

A notable feature of the maechee communities in Isan forest monasteries is how often they include the mother and perhaps one or two sisters of the abbot. Monks have long sought to express their debt of gratitude to their parents by encouraging them when widowed and when all their children have grown up, to adopt the monastic life. By this means, they honour the well-known words of the Buddha:

*Even if one should carry one's mother about on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and while doing so should live a hundred years. And if one should attend to them by anointing them with salves, by massaging, bathing and rubbing their limbs, and they should even void their excrements there - even by that, would one not do enough for one's parents, one would not repay them.*

*But, O monks, one who encourages his parents lacking in faith, settles and establishes them in faith; encourages his parents deficient in virtue, settles and establishes them in virtue; encourages his stingy parents, settles and establishes them in generosity; who encourages his unwise parents, settles and establishes them in wisdom - such a one, O monks, does enough for his parents; he repays them and more than repays them for what they have done.*

AN 2.31-32

The spiritual welfare of Luang Por's mother, Mae Pim, was a constant concern to him. During his years as a *tudong* monk, his regular visits to his home village were, above all, opportunities to give guidance and instruction to her. It must have been of considerable satisfaction to him that it was she who led the delegation which came to visit him in Amnat Charoen in early 1954, bearing a request that he establish a monastery in Pah Pong forest.

It is not known whether Mae Pim's move into Pah Pong was in response to Luang Por's suggestion or at her own request. What is known is that soon after the Sangha was settled into the new monastery, huts were built in the central area near the kitchen for Mae Pim and two companions. The arrival of the three elderly women did not, however, signal the beginning of the Wat Pah Pong maechee community as such. Although the women kept the Eight Precepts of the maechees, they did so informally. At this early stage of development of Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por was still finding his way as the leader of a monastic community, unwilling, as yet, to take on the extra responsibility of establishing and leading a community of nuns. In fact, Luang Por harboured serious misgivings about the whole idea of monks and maechees living together in the same monastery.

## A PROPOSITION

A rather exceptional woman made Luang Por change his mind. Pim Utaigorn\* was a fifty-year-old villager who became a regular at the monastery on Observance Day. She was determined to become a maechee. Luang Por was impressed by her faith and sincerity but, at first, refused her requests for Ordination. Then, one day, he made her a proposition. At the back of the monastery, in the southwest corner, she could have a kuti built and live there. It would mean dwelling alone in an isolated clearing in the middle of a thick forest generally believed to be haunted. If she could endure it, Luang Por told her, he would ordain her. If she really wanted Wat Pah Pong to have a nuns' community, then she must start it herself. It was a daunting challenge, not least in light of the debilitating fear of spirits that almost all people of her culture felt in the forest at night. But Pim Utaigorn accepted the offer with gratitude and overcame all obstacles in her path with a quiet, unfussed assurance.

Pim lived in a small hut built for her by her family. She planted chillies, salad greens and papayas, to supplement the alms-round rice that the monks sent to her every morning. She spent many hours a day practising sitting and walking meditation. Luang Por became satisfied that she had the qualities that would make her a good senior nun. In 1956, he formally ordained Pim Utaigorn \*\*, Mae Pim and the two other older women as maechees and established a boundary for the new Maechee Section covering an area of some thirty acres.

A daily schedule was established that closely followed that of the monks. At 3.00 a.m., nuns would chant and meditate together. At dawn, they would begin to prepare food from the garden they cultivated for the Sangha's daily meal. After the meal, they would have free time to practise meditation or attend to personal projects until a work period at 3.00 p.m., followed by bathing, walking meditation and the evening session of chanting and meditation. On every Observance Day, the nuns would practise throughout the night.

\*No relation to Luang Por's mother.

\*\*Future mentions of 'Maechee Pim' will refer to Pim Utaigorn.

The news that a maechee community had been formally established at Wat Pah Pong produced a steady stream of applicants. Luang Por began accepting more candidates from the growing waiting list. Initially, he kept to a policy of taking only older women, but in 1959 another milestone was passed when Boonyu Pimwong, aged 24, and Kham Khenprakhong, aged 23, were allowed to join the community on a probationary basis. After the requisite time had passed smoothly, the two women were formally accepted as maechees and went on to become stalwarts of the community for the next fifty years.

Maechee Pim's devotion to meditation was an inspiration to the burgeoning community. Her frugality became legendary. One nun remembered that when food was scarce, she would prefer to let others have what was available, while she would simply roast sun-dried leftover rice with a little salt and eat it out of an old metal dish. When helping out with group activities, Maechee Pim's head would always be slightly bowed, maintaining sense-restraint and abstaining from pointless chatter. At one time, the nuns remembered her levelling off the top of a termite mound near her kuti and surrounding it with a ring of thorny branches. She explained that she was experiencing some drowsiness in her meditation. This was to be her new meditation seat.

#### MAECHEE BOONYU

The lives of maechees usually take place out of the limelight, and few details of their experience and practice find their way into the public realm. Fortunately, when Maechee Boonyu passed away in 1996, a funeral volume was published. It included a short biography that offers an intriguing glimpse of an inspiring woman.

Over the years, amongst the small group of senior maechees that led the community, Maechee Boonyu became acknowledged as the first among equals. In many ways, she was an archetypal Isan woman of her generation: competent, resilient, an apparently tireless worker with a rock-solid moral core and a no-nonsense kindness. She had first shown a precocious maturity as a small child. All Isan children would be expected to participate in the family work, but when her father was bed-ridden by a large abscess on his leg, the seven-year-old Boonyu was given the onerous

task of caring for him. The rest of the family were needed in the fields, and she was the only available nurse. She took to it without complaint. For many months, she was her father's constant companion, cooking for him, washing his clothes, wiping him down and keeping the abscess clean.

As she grew up, Boonyu was known as a gentle person who disliked conflict, but every now and again, a more resolute side of her character was revealed. She was renowned in the village for the time she apprehended a chicken thief by hiding by the family chicken coop and hitting him over the head with a piece of timber as hard as she could ('more than once', she admitted) as he made his escape.

She liked to go to Wat Pah Pong on Observance Day and spoke often of one day becoming a nun. In her free time, she would go to the Maechee Section and help out with odd jobs or teach some of the less literate maechees to read the chanting book. She rejected all suitors.

The turning point came one day when she attended the weekly all-night practice session in the monastery with her mother. She was feeling drowsy that night, but was shaken awake when Luang Por started to expound upon an old Isan saying: 'A child is like a noose around your neck; a spouse is like rope pinning your arms behind you; wealth and possessions are like shackles around your legs.' As Luang Por expanded on the sufferings inherent in the household life, it was suddenly and completely clear to her. As she realized that she was still free of these traps, she breathed a sigh of relief. From that moment, her determination to become a nun became assured, and before long she was one.

Life in the monastery was not easy for the young Maechee Boonyu. At first, her health was poor. At one point during a serious illness, an elder sister came to visit, and in trying to persuade her to disrobe, quoted an old saying about monastics and illness, the gist of which was those who haven't accumulated enough merit before ordaining will not survive the rigours of monastic life. It seemed, she said, that Maechee Boonyu was clearly one such person. If she didn't return to lay life, she could die. Maechee Boonyu replied that she was going to die sooner or later anyway, wherever she lived. But whenever the day of her death did arrive, she was

determined to meet it in the monastery, and as a nun. Which, decades later, loved and respected, she did.

## DEPENDENT AUTONOMY

The Maechee Section at Wat Pah Pong was completely segregated from the monks' area and surrounded by a fence. It consisted of kutis (somewhat closer together than the monks for safety), a Dhamma Hall for group chanting and meditation, and a kitchen with a vegetable garden and an orchard. After the death of Maechee Pim in 1965, the day-to-day affairs of the maechee community were left in the hands of a committee which consisted of Maechee Boonyu, the head nun, and four other senior figures, but was ultimately under the authority of Luang Por.

Once a month, Luang Por would meet with the committee. These meetings allowed him to offer its members advice and encouragement and to deal with practical matters. He would listen to senior maechees' questions and worries and advise on such matters as principles of leadership, how to promote harmony in the group and how to encourage the younger nuns. Sometimes, the maechees remembered long afterwards, he would inspire them with stories of the great bhikkhnis at the time of the Buddha.

In 1964, Luang Por established a code of regulations for the maechees. These regulations were read out to the community of maechees after evening chanting on Uposatha Day, the twice monthly occasion on which the monks gathered for the recitation of the *Pāṭimokkha* discipline.

## REGULATIONS OF THE MAECHEE SECTION, WAT NONG PAH PONG

1. It is forbidden at all times for maechees to gather together in groups in order to socialize and indulge in idle conversation.
2. Communal activities such as eating the daily meal, washing up, sweeping, bathing etc. should be performed in concord, in an orderly fashion and with mindfulness.
3. Maechees should keep the area surrounding their kuti clean, by regularly sweeping it and keeping it free from ants and termites.

4. Maechees should be frugal in eating, rest and conversation. Maechees should not be outgoing and exuberant.
5. On receiving gifts, maechees should share them in a just and appropriate way.
6. When a maechee is ill, her fellow maechees should help to nurse her with loving-kindness.
7. Maechees should determine that their actions of body, speech and mind directed towards fellow maechees whether face-to-face or behind their backs, be guided by loving-kindness.
8. Maechees should pay respect to each other according to seniority.
9. Maechees should keep all their precepts purely, and not make themselves objects of aversion to their fellow maechee.
10. It is forbidden for any single nun to govern the community of maechees or establish new regulations on her own authority (and with wrong view).
11. A maechee who is aware of a problem should quickly inform the head of the Sangha.
12. A maechee wishing to go out of the monastery for any purpose must first inform the head of the (bhikkhu) Sangha.
13. It is forbidden for a maechee to claim rights over a kuti whose construction she has sponsored.
14. It is forbidden for a maechee to receive guests of the opposite sex in her kuti, except in certain cases of illness.
15. It is forbidden for a maechee to display or promote things unconnected with Dhamma or Vinaya for the sake of gain. Such behaviour is wrong livelihood and is harmful to the Buddhist religion.
16. It is forbidden for maechees to put themselves at the service of householders. To do so does harm to them.

17. Maechees should seek harmony through shared Right View. They should not quarrel with others under the influence of wrong views.
18. It is forbidden for maechees to maintain contacts with monks, novices, other maechee or laypeople, either within or outside the monastery, except for necessary reasons connected with Dhamma.
19. It is forbidden for maechees to be involved in fund-raising activities.
20. It is forbidden for any male over the age of 12 to spend the night in the Maechee Section, except when unavoidable.
21. Anyone wishing to ordain or to stay in the Maechee Section must be accompanied by a guardian as a reference, and have a reasonable number of sponsors.

The majority of these regulations were adapted from those drawn up by Luang Por for the monks, which he, in turn, derived from the Vinaya training rules. They did much to provide behavioural norms for the maechees that, in most respects, were in line with those of the monks. A few of the regulations, however, – such as [13] and [19], for example – reflect the fact that maechees, unlike the monks, were not required to give up the use of money.

The consequences of transgressing these regulations is not made explicit. In fact, this lack of clarity is inevitable given the rather loose terminology of some of the points; point [4], for example, is more of a general exhortation against extravagant behaviour rather than a rule. It seems reasonable to assume that by confining himself to a glowering, ‘Transgressors will be dealt with accordingly’, Luang Por sought to give himself the flexibility to deal with problems on a case-by-case basis.

Familiar themes dominate the regulations: harmony, order and discipline, sense-restraint, mutual warmth and respect, contentment and fewness of wishes. The regulations enjoin a high standard of conduct, intimidatingly so in some areas. They played a large part in giving the Wat Pah Pong maechees an identity as ‘forest nuns’, and, in particular, ‘Wat Pah Pong forest nuns’. They provided the foundation on which to base a training

that gave the same importance to attention to detail in daily life that characterized that of the monks.

Sangha regulations formed the bedrock of the Wat Pah Pong culture, providing norms to which newcomers were expected to adapt. A probationary period for women aspiring to become maechees allowed them to train by the standards that would be demanded of them as Wat Pah Pong nuns. Those unwilling or unable to live by such a code left before ordaining, thus minimizing the disruption to the community.

As the majority of women who applied to become maechees at Wat Pah Pong did so out of faith in Luang Por, there was always a possibility that some might dismiss the authority of the leaders of the maechee community ('You are not my teacher!'). The code of regulations, endorsed as it was by Luang Por himself, made the job of the senior maechees easier. It provided ready proof that they were not bent on imposing their own will on the community, merely implementing the wishes of Luang Por and the Sangha.

## GOVERNANCE

Although he delegated the daily administration of the Maechee Section to the senior maechees, Luang Por's presence was felt strongly by everyone. The mere words, 'I will put the matter to Luang Por', uttered by one of the senior maechees, was powerful enough to dissolve all but the most intractable of problems. Maechee Boonyu, looking back in the late 1980s, said that serious conflicts in the community were rare, but when something did arise, it was always a great comfort to her to know that, if the matter could not be resolved, Luang Por would be there to help her:

"Luang Por said to me if things get too much for the senior maechees, if people are being difficult and stubborn, then you can come and ask for my assistance ... We senior maechees acted like elder sisters looking after their younger siblings. If someone deviated from the way of practice laid down in the regulations or from our instructions, we would admonish them. If they still didn't mend their ways after two or three warnings, then we would have to inform Luang Por, who we relied upon as our

patron and protector. And so we managed. Otherwise, we wouldn't have survived.

"I wasn't the only one in charge. 'Senior Maechee' is just what people call me. I've never had absolute power; I'm not a dictator or anything like that. We have a committee of four or five maechees, and if someone is behaving badly, then it's a matter to be discussed by the whole committee. At that time [before Luang Por's illness], if we all agreed, then the matter would be taken to Luang Por. He wouldn't immediately accept our side of the story though. He would conduct his own investigations.

"When Luang Por came, he wouldn't just lay down the law or take anyone's side. He would usually give a Dhamma talk in a relaxed natural manner on a subject unconnected to the problem of the difficult nun. After he'd finished, he would drink some water and then discuss various bits of business in his easygoing way. Then out of the blue he would say, 'Oh and Maechee So-and-so, how are you? How is your practice? Don't go giving headaches to the senior maechees, will you?'

"Generally, he spoke in a way that 'neither bruised the lotus nor muddied the water'. Whether they were right or wrong, he wouldn't hurt peoples' feelings needlessly. But sometimes, he would have to speak directly in order for people to recognize their mistakes, so that they would become more aware and amend their behaviour in the future."

But, as Maechee Boonyu recalled, when Luang Por was stern, it would have a considerable impact:

"Anyone of a sensitive disposition would be still feeling it for two or three days afterwards, even if they hadn't been the one he told off.

"Everybody was afraid of him. Of course, it wasn't as if Luang Por ever hit anybody or even used harsh words, but I only had to mention his name and disputes would fizzle out. If Luang Por was due to give a talk in the Maechee Section while there was a problem going on with one of the maechees, that nun would assume that I'd told Luang Por all about it beforehand. Her head would ache, she'd feel like she needed to go to the toilet. It's hard to say why the reaction would be as severe as that – but it was.

“Luang Por would be very calm and his discourse would be mildly spoken. But – who knows why? – the maechee would be terrified. And yet if you were to ask any of the maechees privately what they felt about him, they would all say that Luang Por was wonderful, and that there was no place like Wat Pah Pong. You see? It’s too subtle to put your finger on. To me, the way he ran the Maechee Section was a marvel.”

### III. VENERABLE FATHER

#### GRUFF

Maechee Boonyu recalled how Luang Por could be especially gruff when maechees asked permission to visit their family:

“He would say, ‘What for? Are you homesick? How long have you been here now? The Buddha never visited his home the whole time he was searching for enlightenment; you’ve only just ordained and you want to go there already.’ If he gave permission, he’d say, ‘Go empty-handed, come back empty-handed. Don’t carry a basket-full there and a basket-full back.’ On the nun’s return he would ask her, ‘How was it? The same way you left it? Did you bring a basket-full back with you?’ He was talking Dhamma language. He meant memories and attachments. If the nun didn’t understand, she’d say, ‘Just a few onions and some garlic, Luang Por.’

“Sometimes, he’d ask one of the older maechees, ‘How many times did you go home last night?’ – meaning how often did her mind go. If the nun didn’t understand, she’d say she hadn’t been at all, and he’d reply, ‘You just didn’t see it go.’”

Ajahn Jun often acted as Luang Por’s attendant on his visits to the Maechee Section.

“Luang Por was especially careful in his relations with women. Although he’d never had the experience of running a household, he ran the monastery in an exemplary way. There were never any scandals. There were no serious disputes. He was always on his guard. Whether through action

or speech, he never gave any of the maechees the opportunity to become close to him by any means whatsoever.

“Luang Por upheld the eight *garudhammas*\*. When he spoke to a nun, he didn’t look at her face \*\*, and he never indulged in worldly, flirtatious speech that might have led her to lose respect.”

More than any other group of his disciples, the maechees tended to hold Luang Por in awe. The monks felt this awe too – and many felt it strongly – but their daily contact with Luang Por and their status as fellow monks, gave it a more nuanced character. The lay disciples also felt the awe, but it was felt more intermittently, as the greater part of their daily lives was bound up with family and work. For the maechees, Luang Por was the reason for the life they led; they looked to him as their father, their teacher, their benefactor. They saw him rarely, and then, only on formal occasions, but they felt his presence everywhere. Most, moreover, took it for granted that he knew, through his psychic powers, everything that went on in their lives and minds (although they admitted wryly that, being human, this belief did not stop negative emotions flooding through them from time to time).

Although Luang Por was supportive in times of genuine crisis, he was also careful to avoid appearing too easily available when problems arose that he wanted them to learn to deal with themselves. Ajahn Jun recalled that one day, while a nun was practising walking meditation, she had an extremely realistic vision of a huge snake wrapping itself around her body. Unsurprisingly, she fainted. A fellow maechee, discovering her lying prostrate on the walking path, called for help. More maechees rushed forward, and, as the reviving nun blurted out the story of the monster snake, a minor panic ensued. Two of the senior maechees rushed over to Luang Por’s kuti to request his assistance: the nun was very distressed – would he please come to see her straight away? Without expressing the slightest concern, Luang Por said, ‘Maybe she’s already dead. Look after her for now, and I’ll come over later on.’ Many hours after the incident, when the excitement had died down, he paid his visit.

\*Rules laid down by the Buddha to define the relationship between bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs.

\*\*It was considered inappropriate for a monk to make eye contact with a woman.

Luang Por had seen monasteries consumed by sexual scandals; he was determined to prevent the same thing happening at Wat Pah Pong. The strict segregation of the monks and maechees he insisted upon was based on his understanding of how the most innocent of relationships could, in an unguarded moment and against all the better judgement of either side, develop into something more serious. His solution was, figuratively, to keep everyone well away from the edge of the cliff.

Although the policy of separation meant that the maechees saw little of Luang Por, and they would undoubtedly have appreciated seeing more of him, they did not expect it. They had little sense of entitlement, having grown up in a world in which the separation between monks and women, whether lay or ordained, was a given.

Generally, the only time the maechees would enter the main area of the monastery was early in the morning, while the monks were on alms-round. The maechees, eyes downcast, would walk through the forest to the kitchen where they would help to prepare food. As soon as the meal was over, they would return to the Maechee Section. If, for some reason, maechees should meet a monk on a path, monastic etiquette required them to squat down with hands in anjali and look studiously at the ground until the monk, also studiously looking elsewhere, had passed. The absence of even a hint of sexual scandal at Wat Pah Pong over the years did much to consolidate its good reputation. But newly arrived monks like Ajahn Jun could experience something akin to a culture shock.

“When I first came to live at Wat Pah Pong, I didn’t know the customs and conventions. I passed a group of maechees and greeted them loudly, ‘Hello there, what are you all up to?’ The maechees looked very shocked and rushed off into the forest. I was baffled. I thought, ‘What is it about forest monasteries? The monks and novices ignore you; even the maechees won’t speak to you.’ Somebody must have told Luang Por that the new monk was doing a lot of improper things, like talking to maechees. The next day he explained things to me, and so after that I understood the way things were done.”

As time went on, a number of Wat Pah Pong branch monasteries opened maechee sections, and these were run on the same principles as the one at Wat Pah Pong, although much smaller monasteries usually required some relaxation of the segregation policy. To guard against any risk of impropriety, a Sangha regulation was subsequently laid down restricting the establishment of maechee sections to those monasteries in which the abbot had spent at least twenty years in the robes.

By the beginning of the 1980s, Luang Por's health was in serious decline, and his visits to the Maechee Section became more irregular. With his influence waning, problems in the maechee community began to increase. Some of the maechees felt a sense of loss and concern for the future. On one occasion shortly before his illness, he explained to them:

I stay aloof from everyone, aloof from all the maechees who come to live here. Everyone is free to speak to me, but I don't speak to everyone. Even so, I feel an inner accord with all of you – it's called 'Dhammic love'. It's not a worldly type of love where you have to keep saying nice things to each other all the time, but one in which any problems that arise are discussed in an appropriate way. There are some of you here that I've never spoken to at all. Don't think it's because you are maechees. These days, the monastery is very large and there are monks and novices that I've never spoken to individually; it's difficult for one person to oversee such a big community. That's why, as far as possible, it's important that everyone takes responsibility for themselves and their practice.

#### NO FAVOURITES

Luang Por had noted how in other monasteries competition for the teacher's attention amongst the resident maechees could lead to jealousies that undermined the harmony of their community. He maintained a strictly impartial stance towards them. Many of the maechees were especially impressed by how he refrained from singling out his mother

for any special attention or privileges.\* In the culture in which they lived, the willingness to treat one's mother as just one member of a larger group was seen as an unusual achievement.

This impartiality was not a blanket indifference. On the contrary, as Maechee Boonyu recalled, Luang Por showed a consistent concern for the welfare of every one of the maechees:

"The monastery was still quite unknown then, and not many people came to offer food. Usually, the only fruit we'd have would be the small amount that came from the maechees' garden. One day, a group of laypeople came to help with a work project. One of them planted a pineapple shoot near the kitchen, and it grew up into a pineapple – very big it was too, like the ones that nowadays they bring up from the southeast. Pineapples were rare then. Every day, when we went to the kitchen we'd look at the pineapple and be thinking how big it was becoming, and wondering what Luang Por would have done with it when it was ripe. All of us were looking forward to taste it because we'd never eaten a pineapple before in our lives. Then one day the pineapple disappeared. 'Oh no' I wailed in my mind, 'Where's it gone?'"

Maechee Boonyu found out the next morning. The pineapple had appeared in the kitchen neatly cut into fifteen equal pieces, one for each of the eight monks and seven maechees in the monastery. Luang Por was not idealistic about sense-restraint. For monastics training themselves to detach from sense pleasures, enjoyment outlives indulgence and is supplanted by equanimity through insight, not by acts of will. For almost all the members of a monastic community subsisting on a bare diet, a slice of an exotic fruit is a treat. Luang Por did not condemn it as worldly foolishness and was content to ensure that everyone in the community, including the maechees, had an equal share in this treat. It was this kind of consistent but understated consideration – one that belied his forbidding demeanour – that endeared him to the maechees.

\*A notable exception to this came with the elaborate funeral that Luang Por arranged for Mae Pim upon her death in 1974, which featured many days of merit-making activities dedicated to her.

Luang Por's concern for the maechees was clearly apparent to the monks, not least through his regular exhortations on the fair distribution of food. He would remind them to always bear in mind the hard work and sacrifice of the maechees that made possible the meals they ate, and to make sure that there was always sufficient food sent back to the kitchen. He said that it would be very bad kamma if they took so much that those who had prepared the food went without.

The emphasis on fairness and impartiality extended to all of the requisites. Maechee Boonyu recalled the distribution of cloth:

"Luang Por would distribute the cloth himself. After he'd arranged a pile for each nun, the bell would be rung, and the maechees would go up to the raised platform in order of seniority and take her cloth. Afterwards, we'd compare the number of pieces, the quality of the cloth, its fineness or coarseness. They would all be exactly the same."

#### TO BE A MAECHEE

Women applying to join the maechee community at Wat Pah Pong were required to undergo a vetting procedure, with senior family members expected to act as sponsors and guarantors of their good character. The most basic criteria for acceptance into the community was that the woman should not be pregnant, and this was a chief reason why women accepted into the community would be expected to undergo a probationary period as a laywoman. The probationary period also provided an opportunity for the senior maechees to observe the applicants' conduct and personality at close quarters and to judge their suitability. The exacting daily schedule and strict regulations played a major role in weeding out the unsuitable candidates. Women applying to join the maechee community at Wat Pah Pong were not expected to make commitments as to the length of time they would remain. Some became maechees for a limited period – perhaps a month – some intended to spend the rest of their lives in the monastery and left after a few days, and then there were those that came for a short time and ended up staying for the rest of their lives.

Most of the maechees, like the monks, came from peasant farming backgrounds and were used to an active, practical life. They usually found the forest monastic life in which formal meditation periods alternate with the mindful performance of communal tasks such as sweeping, cleaning, cooking and tending the garden, provided a good balance. For those who felt that enlightenment was still far away, accumulating merit through wholesome activities provided a reassuring compensation for the frustrations of meditation.



Growing vegetables and preparing food constituted the maechees' primary contribution to the overall functioning of the monastery. As the number of monks and nuns increased to almost a hundred, it became a major daily effort. The work was done in noble silence, punctuated only by unavoidable orders or requests. Subtle points of etiquette concerning such matters as the use of pots and the frequency of hand washing helped to keep the nuns grounded in the present moment. Cleanliness was an important object of mindfulness for everyone. The maechees also contributed to most of the major work projects that took place in the monastery over the years. Perhaps their proudest achievement was the

firing of the many thousands of bricks that the monks used to construct the monastery wall.

## TUDONG

At Wat Pah Pong, the maechees were expected to keep many of the dhutaṅga ascetic practices incorporated into the monks' training. They ate only one meal a day in a single vessel (in their case a white enamel bowl). Every Observance Day, they abstained from lying down and spent the night meditating. Many of them took on special practices, such as fasting or keeping silent, in order to accelerate their efforts in meditation.

Although it was not considered safe or socially acceptable for maechees to go wandering through the countryside on tudong like the monks, Luang Por did give the more senior nuns opportunities to practise in wild, lonely areas. With the opening of Tam Saeng Pet monastery in 1969 and Wat Kheuan the following year, the Sangha acquired large, remote properties where Luang Por would sometimes give permission for groups of maechees to live out in the forest under their glots and come face to face with their fears of spirits and wild animals.

Living under a glot in the forest without the protection afforded by a kuti was a daunting challenge, and only the most mature of the nuns were given this opportunity. On her first such expedition, Maechee Jun, one of the senior maechees, recounted with amusement how she'd been terrified throughout the night by the eerie sound of what she was sure was a malevolent spirit. The next day she was the object of some gentle teasing when she found out that what she had been listening to was, in fact, the plaintive sound of a female civet cat abandoned by her mate.

But once the maechees had overcome their initial fears of the forest, they found, like the monks, that life under such conditions gave rise to an alertness and enthusiasm for practice that was profoundly energizing.

## ADMONISHMENT

One of the guiding principles of monastic life laid down in the Vinaya is that every monk and nun should make themselves open to admonishment

from all other members of their community. But mutual admonishment is not an easy ideal to live up to. In Thailand, the cultural emphasis on preserving social harmony through non-confrontation makes it particularly difficult. Nevertheless, Luang Por would often speak on this topic.

One year, during the Rains Retreat period, Luang Por instructed the mae-chee community on this principle in detail. By this time, his health was in decline, and he had been unable to visit the Maechee Section as often as he had in previous years. He emphasized the importance of each maechee learning how to admonish themselves as a foundation for admonishing others. They had to learn how to teach themselves, how to take care of their minds.

Before admonishing anyone else you should admonish yourself. Why? Because if you don't, and that person doesn't accept your admonishment, then you may lose your temper. You have to put yourself in a good frame of mind first. Then if she scolds you or abuses you, you won't let it affect you; you know you've done the right thing. If it's necessary to admonish someone and they take it well, then that's good, but if they don't, then that's their affair, not yours.

If the person you admonished criticizes you, then listen to what they have to say. If she says, 'You're just jealous of me', ask yourself whether it's true. Investigate it. If it's not, then she's got it wrong and that's her responsibility. Your practice is to let go, to learn to see everything in terms of Dhamma.

Those who received admonishment were to constantly train themselves to be open to the words of others, even if they seemed unfair or inaccurate. Learning how to deal with praise and blame was an essential element of the path to wisdom.

You need to learn how to take responsibility for your speech and actions. Then, if you act with a good intention and you're accused of acting with an impure intention you can be at ease, because you know your own mind, and you know for sure that it's not true. The Buddha taught us to have mindfulness at all times. When you're going to say something, do you have a good intention?

What's the purpose of your words? You have to be aware of your actions. Then, when someone says you spoke improperly, you don't get upset because you considered well before speaking those words: you know your intention was good, and the person who says you did wrong is mistaken. You are at ease.



Are you as good as they say? You have to know yourself. Don't believe anyone else. Watch out. They say you're bad, that's someone's words. They say you're good, and it's just words. It's not who you are; only you know that.



We come here to let go. If someone gives you an admonishment, then receive it with a '*Sādhu!*', glad that you're getting it for free. Whether you're in the right or the wrong – listen. It's through listening that wisdom can arise.

He illustrated his advice with his own interpretation of a Zen training method:

The Zen masters teach their students to reduce conceit and views. There's not much study involved. If students start to nod while they're sitting in meditation, the teacher hits them on the head with a long stick. The student says, 'Thank you sir, for being so kind as to hit me on the head with your stick. It reminded me of what I'm supposed to be doing. Thank you, sir.'

Can all of you maechees living here thank each other for admonition? Give it a try; it takes wisdom. If any of you get drowsy during meditation, have Maechee Khamfah hit you over the head with a stick – and then say, 'Thank you.' Could you do it? Understand this point.

The maechees were to see how valuable it was to receive admonishment, and how fortunate they were to be in a situation where they could receive it.

All of you have an advantage over me. I invite you to admonish me if I do something wrong, but it's difficult for you; nobody does it, because I'm the teacher and you don't dare to. That's why practice as a senior monk is so hard. Sometimes the teacher does something wrong, and everyone just lets him carry on doing it without him realizing it's wrong. It's difficult for a teacher to find someone to teach him. But all of you are lucky. If you do something wrong, somebody tells you straight away. It's a really good thing; don't think negatively about it. Try to see that practice is exactly about things like this. If you let go, if you put something down, it comes to a halt, it's no longer heavy. It is the attachment that is heavy.

#### DHAMMA TEACHINGS

The Dhamma teachings Luang Por gave to the maechees were little different in substance from those that he gave to the monks. Although he might emphasize Right Speech and various community values a little more at the beginning of talks to the maechees, the essence of the instruction he gave was the same. The more profound teachings were given freely. In fact, monks who accompanied Luang Por when he went to teach the maechees would say that the talks he gave on these occasions were amongst the best they'd ever heard. A passage in which Luang Por related to the nuns one of his favourite stories gives the flavour of these talks:

One of the Supreme Patriarchs went on a trip to China, where he was presented with a beautiful tea cup. The patriarch had never seen anything so beautiful. He started thinking about how he'd show off this gift to all his lay supporters when he got back to Thailand. But as soon as he took the cup into his hands, he started to suffer. 'Where shall I put it down? Where shall I keep it?' He became afraid of breaking the cup.

Once the tea cup was in his shoulder bag, he constantly reminded his attendant, 'Be careful with that shoulder bag; the tea cup is fragile. Be careful!' It was nothing but suffering for him. The patriarch had been having a good time before that. The suffering began as soon as he received the tea cup – that's when it became

heavy. Sitting on the plane back to Thailand, he would fret whenever the novice went near the shoulder bag, ‘Be careful! It’s fragile.’ If a layperson came close, it was, ‘Be careful with that shoulder bag!’ He suffered all the way back to Thailand because he thought the tea cup belonged to him. The suffering came with the attachment.

One day much later, back in his monastery, a novice picked up the cup to have a look at it. The cup slipped through his hands and broke. The Supreme Patriarch exclaimed with joy, ‘At last! I’ve been suffering over that cup for years!’

It’s the same with the five aggregates (*khandhas*). They’re heavy; throw them away. Throw away form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. Don’t take any of them as self or as belonging to self. They are merely form, merely feelings, merely perceptions, merely mental formations and merely consciousness – that’s all. Don’t grasp on to any of them. Seeing their true nature is liberation. We’ve been attached to conventional realities, but when we see the five aggregates for what they are, then everything flips over, and there is freedom from the conventions. When we put down the burden of the five aggregates we feel lightness. This is what I’d like you all to understand.

Like the monks, the maechees talked amongst themselves of how Luang Por always seemed to address exactly the issues that they were facing in their practice and wanted to ask him about. As Maechee Boonyu recalled, when he taught the Dhamma, it was clear to them that he genuinely believed in their capacity to liberate themselves from suffering, and he wanted to help them in every way he could.

“He taught us to abandon craving, not to attach to an idea of self, to see impermanence. We practised as he recommended, and we saw the truth of what he taught. I determined to follow his teachings and saw that they were the path to liberation from suffering. He taught us not to be deluded by the physical body, to let go, to abandon attachment, to put things down. I was inspired by his teachings, I fully accepted them and practised accordingly, and had no thoughts of returning to the world.

“When he came to give a talk, if there were a lot of newly ordained maechees present, he’d speak on a basic level: about not arguing or contending, knowing the meaning of the precepts. On the intermediary level, he’d talk about training to abandon greed, hatred and delusion, attachment to views and conceit, how to practise once our precepts were purely kept. On the highest level, he’d talk about what you’d see and what you’d experience when you practised; he’d talk about the purpose of becoming a nun, about the highest goal of a monastic’s life. He would talk about Nibbāna and *anattā*, and there being nothing worth attaching to. Sometimes he might ask an older maechee, ‘Do you know what the state of your mind will be at the point of death?’ He taught us to know the knowing in the knowing. Not the knowing of heat and cold, of pleasure and pain, of day and night, but the knowing in the knowing.”

#### THE DUTY OF A SAMĀNA

On one occasion, while addressing the maechees, Luang Por returned to an old and potent theme: how to make the most of monastic life; how to live as a true *samaṇa*. Progress in Dhamma began with the cultivation of a sense of urgency.

‘The days and nights are relentlessly passing.’ That’s what it says in the books ... ‘What are you doing right now?’ ... What does it mean to you to be a maechee?

If you say that you’ve come to abandon defilements, then do you know what the defilements are? Can you recognize the unwholesome qualities in your mind? Are you abandoning defilements? Are you resisting them?

What are you thinking right now? What are you doing? Are you thinking wisely? Or foolishly? Are you thinking jealous thoughts? Angry ones? Is there desire in your mind? Examine the present moment.

Luang Por said that now that they had left the lay life, the Buddha was asking them questions. He was asking, ‘Are you conducting yourself like a *samaṇa* yet?’ ‘Are you speaking like a *samaṇa*?’ ‘Do you eat like a *samaṇa*?’

He warned them against living heedlessly. Living too comfortably was an obstacle to practice. He said that the way of the *samaṇa* is to put constant effort into abandoning greed, hatred and delusion. It is through that effort that the *samaṇa* earned the respect and support of lay Buddhists. But if lay Buddhists did praise their practice, they should treat those words of praise with caution. If they were not true, then after hearing those words of unearned praise, they should put forth the effort to become worthy of them.

Luang Por said that the reason people don't let go of defilements is that they haven't seen the suffering inherent in them, and so are reluctant to abandon their attachment. Greed, hatred and delusion arise in our minds because of our wayward thinking. A person with wrong view will not find peace even in the most conducive environment. Wrong view always brings suffering in its wake; only Right View leads to peace. Peaceful states of mind developed in one holding wrong views will never lead to wisdom. Only the calm informed by Right View can support insight into the way things are.

He stressed that it is Right View that enables a *samaṇa* to know how to adapt: to know how to live in a large community, how to live in a small community, how to live alone. When Right View has been developed, living in a large community feels no different from living alone. The harmony of the group is a vital, supportive factor for practice. Chanting together, meditating together, working together – all foster the harmony of the group. When other maechees act poorly, he said, then be aware that this is because their Dhamma practice is not yet strong enough to overcome their defilements. Some have deeply ingrained bad habits; they have never created the conditions for wisdom and letting go in the past. Make allowances for them.

You've still got defilements; you've still got craving. So, you try. You increase the number of practices you've taken on. You examine your body, speech and mind every day. Where are the shortcomings? You extend the bits that are too short. Whatever's too long, you cut it off.





*X*  
*out of compassion*

*One by one, little by little, moment by moment, the wise should remove their own impurities, as a smith removes the dross from silver.*

*Dhp 239*

# *Out of Compassion*

*Luang Por and the Lay Community*

*Wander forth, O monks, for the welfare of the manyfolk, for the happiness of the manyfolk, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare and happiness of devas and humans.*

SN 4.5

*Excellent, Lord, excellent! It is as if, Lord, a man were to set upright that which was overturned, or were to reveal that which was hidden, or were to point out the way to one who had gone astray, or were to hold a lamp amidst the darkness, so that those who have eyes may see. Even so, has the doctrine been explained in various ways by the Exalted One. I take refuge, Lord, in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. May the Exalted One receive me as a lay follower; as one who has taken refuge from this very day to life's end.*

e.g. DN 2

*How does the monk minister to the lay Buddhists?*

- *By discouraging them from evil.*
- *By encouraging them in goodness.*
- *By assisting them with loving-kindness.*
- *By giving them new knowledge.*
- *By clarifying the teachings they have heard before.*
- *By showing them the path to happiness.*

DN 31

## I. INTRODUCTION

Appreciating the kindness and assistance that one has received in one's life and making efforts to express that appreciation in appropriate ways (Pali: *kataññū-katavedi*) are, together with generosity, probably the Buddhist virtues most deeply embedded in Thai society. They are clearly apparent in relationships between sons and daughters with their parents and guardians, and in the respect paid to teachers and benefactors of any description. In Thailand, 'boonkhun' – the ties and obligations perceived to have been created between people by beneficial actions – underlies most meaningful social intercourse, including that between members of the Sangha and the laity.

In early 1954, it was the request made by a deputation of villagers, led by his mother, which persuaded Luang Por Chah that the time had come to establish a forest monastery near his home village. The villagers' formal invitation and Luang Por's acceptance of it reflects well the nature of the relationship between the Sangha and the laity envisioned by the Buddha. The tradition holds that any teaching by monks – even a single Dhamma talk – must always be initiated by the laity. They must want to be taught. It is for this reason that Buddhist monastics are not evangelists: they only speak Dhamma to those who have shown a sincere interest in listening to it and have asked them to teach. Like many forest monks, Luang Por had long harboured plans to eventually return to the place of his birth and propagate the Dhamma there. But it was only when he received a formal invitation from representatives of the local lay community that he felt conditions were ripe for him to do so.

For Luang Por, the establishment of a monastery was the natural, almost inevitable, next step of his life as a monk. He had reached a level of practice with which he was confident there could be no regress. He was in the prime of his life, and a growing number of monks looked to him as their teacher. Furthermore, he was aware that if he was to help his mother to make progress in the Dhamma, he should not leave it for too much longer. Living as a monk, he knew that such assistance was the way – the only way – he could truly repay his great debt of gratitude to her.

In his discourses, the Buddha repeatedly encourages monks to seek out solitude and to be wary of entanglement with lay supporters. At the same time, the number of teachings outlining the correct and incorrect nature of the relationship between monks and laypeople suggests that there was considerable contact between them. For example, certain means of rendering assistance to laypeople are forbidden as being likely to reduce the respect in which the Sangha is held. Monks are not allowed to act as doctors, because to do so would mean they become perceived as healers of the body rather than the mind. They are warned against developing so close a relationship with laypeople that, ‘he laughs when they laugh, he cries when they cry’. It is clear from such guidelines that the Buddha gave considerable importance to creating a framework in which the Sangha could exert the maximum positive influence on society without compromising its own integrity.

Chief amongst the tasks of a monastic in this regard is to uphold the teachings through personal example and to instruct the laity who wish to understand the Dhamma. Although there are references to the inadvisability of monks with no insight trying to teach others (such a monk is compared to a person sinking in mud trying to teach someone else how to climb out of it), the idea that the accumulation of knowledge and experience should issue in its sharing, is taken for granted.

As a mendicant order, the Sangha is dependent upon local communities for material sustenance and for new members. A monastery will only thrive when its inhabitants gain the respect and devotion of their lay supporters. This occurs naturally when monastics determine to lead their lives in such a way as to provide a ‘field of merit’ for their supporters, and when they lead and inspire them on the Buddhist path through example and instruction. This reciprocal relationship is underpinned by many Vinaya training rules and observances that prevent monasteries from becoming materially independent. For example, there are rules prohibiting digging the earth, cooking, the consumption of un-offered food, and the storing of food overnight. All such rules compel monks to have daily contact with the laity, at the very least, on their daily alms-round. The degree to which the Buddha took the laity into account when announcing new Vinaya rules is made clear from a prominent element of

his reasoning for doing so: ‘the arousing of faith in those without it and the strengthening of faith in those who already possess it’.

In establishing a monastery near his birth place, Luang Por sought not only to create an excellent training environment for monastics, but also a centre for propagating the Dhamma amongst the local villages and towns. He realized that the two goals were not only compatible, but could reinforce each other. It was through faith in the monks’ integrity that people would start to come to the monastery to hear the Dhamma. It was through promoting authentic Buddhist values in society that the long-term welfare of the Sangha was secured.

Luang Por’s teachings for the laity rested upon the same foundation as those for the Sangha: namely, the Four Noble Truths. His talks invariably returned to the question of suffering, how it arose and how it could be brought to cessation. His instructions on meditation practice were scarcely different from those he gave to the monastics. The differences that could be discerned appeared in the areas where he adapted his treatment of key issues, such as the development of Right View and the importance of moral conduct, to address the particular challenges faced by householders.

In the mid-1950s, when Luang Por established Wat Pah Pong, almost all the people of Ubon considered themselves Buddhist, and yet it was rare to find those who did not also ascribe to conflicting non-Buddhist beliefs of one sort or another. Few people took the Five Precepts as their moral standard. For this reason, in the early pioneering days, Luang Por concentrated on combating local superstitions and explaining the basic principles of Dhamma so as to instil Right View. He taught the local people the meaning of the Triple Gem and what taking refuge in it meant; he encouraged them to give up harmful social vices such as alcohol and gambling, and to establish themselves in Right Livelihood and morality. He encouraged them to come to the monastery on the weekly Observance Day, where they could take a break from their usual routines, rest, read, listen to Dhamma talks and practise meditation.

## II. TO THE MONASTERY

*To be patient and open to admonishment, to have contact with monastics and to participate in Dhamma discussions on due occasions – this is a great blessing.*

*Kh<sup>p</sup> 5; Sn 2.5*

A monastery is to be found at the heart of almost every Thai village. Its entrance is usually through an open archway rather than a lockable gate. Lay Buddhists go in and out of the monastery every day: offering food in the morning, visiting the abbot, making merit, or perhaps just taking a short cut to the other side of the village. During Luang Por's lifetime, the village headman, the head teacher at the local school and the abbot of the monastery were the acknowledged leaders of the community, with the abbot as the senior member of the triumvirate.

On the other hand, the strength of the relationship between rural communities and the forest monasteries was more varied. There were a number of reasons for this, mostly practical: the monasteries might be situated anywhere up to five or six kilometres from a village, and – especially before the advent of motor transport – getting there and back could take a considerable chunk out of a working day.

The Dhammayut forest monasteries established by Luang Pu Mun and his disciples throughout northern Isan were intended to create the most peaceful and secluded environment possible for monastic training, and so, they sought to reduce contact with the lay community to a minimum. Laypeople were welcome to go to the monasteries in the morning to offer food, and to request teachings or advice from the abbot after he had finished his meal. But these wats would not accept invitations for monks to take their meal in laypeople's houses on auspicious occasions or to enter the village to chant the verses for the newly deceased. The Observance Day would pass like any other. There would be no laypeople taking Eight Precepts and staying overnight in the monastery; the abbot would rarely give a formal discourse to the lay community. The result was a lack of distractions for the monks, but at the same time, a reduction

in the positive impact that a good monastery could produce in local communities.

It is in his policy towards the lay Buddhist community that Luang Por differentiated himself most clearly from the majority of Luang Pu Mun disciples. It is clear to see from the accounts of the lay supporters of Wat Pah Pong, how much importance Luang Por gave to teaching and training them. The time he was willing to put into encouraging them to live good lives, year in and year out, endeared him to them.

Luang Por's more inclusive style of teaching, integrating the teaching of monastics and lay supporters, was linked to his emphasis on wisdom as the heart of spiritual life. He wanted people to understand themselves and to know how to live their lives wisely. For householders, that included giving advice on everything from basic principles of hygiene and diet, to how to rear children and make an honest living, and extended to the means to develop meditation and insight. It was a seamless teaching. He insisted to his lay disciples that study and insight into the simple undeniable truths of their bodies and minds could transform every aspect of their lives.

In most other forest monasteries, Dhamma practice was seen to demand the development of high levels of concentration or the intensive application of specific meditation techniques. In such monasteries, monks often viewed the laypeople as living in conditions incompatible with the quiet and seclusion required for such profound inner cultivation. Owing to this view, a rather dismissive attitude to the local villagers could take hold, in gist: 'Practice generosity. Keep the Five Precepts. That's good enough.'

Perhaps uniquely amongst forest teachers, on every Observance Day, Luang Por would lead the lay community in meditation and chanting and give them discourses that could last many hours at a time. The lay supporters were given a sense of belonging and a pride in themselves as Dhamma practitioners and as disciples of the forest monastery.

People who spent time at the forest monastery were not universally praised. One common view was that monasteries were a last resort for people who had problems they were unable to solve. One reason why there were always fewer men than women amongst the lay supporters

was that many men were afraid that going to the monastery regularly would be seen as a public admission that they had difficulties they were unable to deal with – a prospect that few males of any culture can bear with equanimity.

The converse of this idea was that if life was going well, then there was, as yet, no need to go to the monastery. It had long been the custom in Thailand to consider the study and practice of Dhamma to be a pursuit for the elderly. Youth, apart from a rite-of-passage ordination for the men, was for education and enjoyment; the middle years were for raising a family; and old age was for going to the monastery to do good deeds and find some inner peace. In Dhamma talks, Luang Por constantly encouraged people to abandon this way of thinking. The monastery, he said, was a refuge from the stresses and strains of daily life. It was a place where people could take a step back from their lives, take an overview and learn life skills that would stand them in good stead in their daily life. If they left it too long, it might be too late. He teased people who waited to go to the monastery until they could no longer sit on the floor and were too deaf to hear the Dhamma talks. Worse than that, they could die first...

And the only way a corpse gets to go to the wat, is when it's carried there for cremation.

Apart from the people who believed that they had too little suffering to need to practise Dhamma, there were those who felt that they had too many worries to make it worthwhile. Even if they went to the monastery, they believed, it would be a waste of time. They could never find any peace until their troubles were sorted out. To Luang Por, this was like someone saying that they would not go to see the doctor until they were feeling better. At the monastery, everyone could learn ways to handle the stresses of their situation better.

Did the Buddha wait until he was free of defilements before going to the wat? Was he free of worries?

On a daily basis, contact between the Sangha and the laity revolved around the offering of the daily meal. Every morning, local villagers would walk to the monastery to help the nuns with cooking side dishes

to supplement the food gathered by the monks on alms-round.\* Any food that was left over after the monks and nuns had taken their share would be distributed amongst them and then taken home for their families. One of the women who seldom missed a day for many years said:

“Luang Por taught us about preparing food to offer the monks. Fermented fish, for example: he told us to boil it first before putting it into the chilli sauce and mixing it with the green papaya salad, because raw meat was forbidden by the Vinaya. He said raw fermented fish and meat were food for tigers! ‘We are cultured human beings’, he said, ‘we should eat cooked food.’ That’s the kind of advice he gave. We tried out the things he suggested at home, and it was good and beneficial and had no drawbacks. We didn’t get liver flukes like the people who eat raw foods. Luang Por didn’t want us to smoke or drink alcohol either. And that was good for us too. It was good for our health, and it saved us money as well.”

The monastery kitchen was overseen by the nuns. In it, the Vinaya rules and conventions relating to food were strictly adhered to. The nuns were devoted to cleanliness and order, mindfulness and attention to detail. They achieved a high degree of cleanliness, one especially impressive for a building largely open to the elements. Wooden slats and wire netting might protect the kitchen against rats, but lizards and other smaller creatures were undeterred. Given the rather lax attitude to hygiene found in most farming communities of the time, the spotlessness of the kitchen came as a revelation to the village women who offered their assistance. It introduced them to a whole new standard of hygiene. The influence of the Wat Pah Pong kitchen gradually spread to the villages around it, a tangible reminder of the positive influence that a monastery could exert in its local area, even in mundane matters of diet and hygiene.

#### OBSERVANCE DAY

The weekly lunar Observance Day was the day that Luang Por encouraged his lay supporters to come to the monastery and receive teachings. Many would arrive in time to offer the morning meal and not leave until dawn

\*The discipline of the white-robed maechee order does not forbid the growing or preparation of food.

of the following day. During this 24-hour period, Luang Por would give two Dhamma talks: one in the morning and a long – sometimes very long – one at night. During the day, people would rest, read Dhamma books, meditate, sweep leaves. Their numbers would grow in the evening as those who had been working during the day arrived.\* In the morning, all the lay community would formally request the Eight Precepts for the duration of their stay in the monastery. This entailed, amongst other things, abstaining from food after midday, dressing in simple modest clothes (everyone wore white), and refraining from wearing makeup and jewellery. Every Observance Day, the monastic community would spend the whole night meditating in the Dhamma Hall. The laymen and laywomen would join them.

Luang Por recommended that those who could not find time to go to the monastery should, nevertheless, make the Observance Day a day to give special attention to their actions and speech, and to devote time to reflection and inner cultivation. He advised them to refrain from all entertainments for the day, give up their evening meal and sleep alone on the floor, using the time freed by such renunciation to study Dhamma and to meditate. If they could not manage every Observance Day, then they should at least try on the two ‘big ones’: the full moon and dark moon days.

There are thirty days in a month. Divide them up: give twenty-six to the world and four – the half-moon, full moon and dark moon days – to the monks. For these four days every month, try to get to the monastery. There you can take a rest from worldly activities and keep pure *sīla*.

On these four days, you don’t make any bad kamma ... Four days that’s all; more than four and nobody would want to take it on. As laypeople, I understand that it’s normal to create bad kamma at times, but the Buddha asked you to refrain for at least four days a month. If you find the time every month, then in two months, that’s eight; and in a year, a lot of days. But if you make every day

\*Outside of the harvesting period in October/November, members of farming communities could choose their day of rest. People working in the town and city could only manage the full Observance Day when it fell on the weekend.

into a People Day (Wan *Khon*)<sup>\*</sup>, how are you ever going to truly flourish as a human being? How will your mind ever be radiant and know the way things are if you don't practise, if you don't make the time? It's not possible.

Entering the monastery, all worldly matters were to be left outside. No gossiping about family or work or local scandals was to be tolerated. The elders were encouraged to be good examples to the younger members of the group:

Those of you who want to smoke or chew betel nut, go outside the monastery gate. In the morning, after you've taken the Eight Precepts, had your meal and listened to a Dhamma discourse, then go out and practise walking meditation. After that you can take a short nap, but don't let it be for very long. After a suitable time, get up promptly and do some sitting meditation. Following your evening bath, go to the hall and practise sitting meditation for a while longer before evening chanting. After chanting, relax for a short while, but don't chat.

This was a time to put effort into practice.

Coming to listen to a talk on Observance Day, it's not enough to simply turn up at the monastery. Just as a cloth has to be clean before it can absorb any dye, so each person coming to the monastery should prepare themselves in the right way. They should dress themselves in clean and appropriate clothing, cleanse their actions and speech and make a determination to cleanse their mind, to make it ready to receive the Dhamma.

Luang Por's Dhamma talks were eagerly awaited by the local villagers.

"Sometimes he wouldn't talk for so long. After a certain time, he would say: 'From now on, pay attention to a silent discourse.' And he would start to meditate there on the Dhamma seat. We'd sit there waiting, but he wouldn't say anything more. The first time, I was drowsy and wanted

<sup>\*</sup>Luang Por often invested this common Thai word, '*khon*', with connotations of 'untrained' or 'worldly' in order to contrast it with the more elevated and Pali-derived, '*manut*', or 'human being'.

to sleep, but I didn't dare with him still seated up there and so I ended up sitting right through the night. In those days Luang Por gave marvellous talks. If you missed one of his talks, you felt hot and dry inside. You never felt bored when he spoke, even if it was something you'd heard many times before, because he always had new ways of saying it that were worth listening to."

#### RECEIVING GUESTS

Luang Por became steadily more well-known throughout the 1970s, and the number of visitors to the monastery increased accordingly. Taking advantage of the American-funded upgrading of Isan's road network during the Vietnam War and the rise in disposable incomes, Thai lay supporters were, for the first time, able to travel to Isan from other parts of the country to pay their respects, make merit and receive teachings from the great forest masters. As a consequence, more and more of Luang Por's days were spent sitting under his kuti receiving guests.

In later years, particularly on weekends or holidays, he might be sitting on his wicker seat teaching by nine o'clock in the morning and hardly rise from his seat until the afternoon or evening as a steady stream of people flowed in and out of the central area of the monastery. The lack of rest and exercise this entailed started to affect Luang Por's health. One wealthy lay supporter became concerned and asked permission to build a fence around Luang Por's kuti so that it would be easier to restrict access to him. Luang Por refused outright. Ajahn Virapon, one of his attendants at the time, remembers him saying: 'They come a long way. They don't have much free time. It would be such a shame if they were to come so far to see me and then be disappointed.'

Once, during a period of ill health, a monk asked him how he dealt with all the demands for his attention and blessings. Luang Por replied:

If I still had wrong thinking, I'd probably have died\* a long time ago, because there are a lot of people here all day. But it's as if there is nobody at all. If you have Right View, then there is

\*This phrase is idiomatic rather than literal, and usually accompanied by a slight shake of the head.

nothing. There's nobody coming and nobody going. The mind just rests in its native place.

The Buddha's teaching that it is a great blessing to meet with wise people, is one that has taken deep root in Thai society. Apart from local farmers and their families, Luang Por's guests came to encompass the whole spectrum of Thai society: government employees, academics, politicians, soldiers, scientists, police officers, businesspeople and bankers, doctors and nurses, university students, school teachers and their pupils.

These people came from the surrounding area and from other parts of Isan, from Bangkok and from other regions of the country. Some came from overseas. People came for different reasons: to pay their respects, to make offerings, to ask questions about private problems or matters of Dhamma, to listen to a Dhamma talk.

Luang Por was never seen to favour any one particular group. It was clear that he tried to give everyone equal time and attention and seemed completely indifferent to social status. His attitude is expressed well by a story told of a great master in Japan. It is said that an old student went to visit the master after a long absence caused by the demands of a burgeoning political career. At the abbot's residence, the man gave the attendant monk his card, upon which his elevated status in the government was elegantly inscribed. After a short time, the attendant returned with the card and the news that the master knew no such person. The old student, after frowning for a moment, took out a pen and, scribbling on the card, obliterated the characters denoting his title. The attendant monk took the card back to the master, and shortly afterwards returned to usher the man within.

One of the ideals of the Buddhist monastery is that people of all walks of life mingle together, unified by a sense of themselves as fellow Buddhists rather than divided by identification with family background, income or livelihood (if there is an aristocracy, it is one of age: respect for the elderly and close attention to their wishes remains). This temporary suspension of social divisions is an ideal (and one frequently forgotten in Thailand today), but it was one that Luang Por strongly encouraged.

Luang Por was famed for his ability to teach the most profound matters in simple terms that his listeners, whatever their background, could understand. He was adept at tailoring his manner and vocabulary to the needs of his audience. Many people who had grown up with the idea that the Dhamma was far too profound for an ordinary person to grasp, found listening to him an exhilarating experience. A common reaction was that he brought the teachings alive for them for the first time. On one occasion, a visitor who had seen a number of Western monks in the monastery, asked Luang Por how many languages he could speak. He replied:

Oh, lots. I can speak the language of villagers, the language of merchants, the language of soldiers – I know so many languages.

## INVITATIONS

Luang Por did little teaching outside of the monastery. He observed that when laypeople were in their own environment, they were rarely as open to the Dhamma as when they made the effort to come into the forest. In the monastery, the peace and lack of interruptions, the physical separation from worldly concerns and comforts, the emotions that arose from entering an environment devoted to spiritual goals – all assisted in creating the conditions conducive to the absorption of Dhamma.

Luang Por would not accept invitations to the kind of public functions in which it was considered mandatory to include a short homily from a senior monk – the numbers of which steadily increased as he became more well-known. Some organizers of these events were well-intentioned: they hoped that his presence might inspire people, who would otherwise never go to a monastery, to take an interest in the Dhamma. Others simply felt that the presence of such a renowned monk would add prestige to the proceedings. In either case, Luang Por would not accept the invitations. He said that it was a waste of time and disrespectful to the Dhamma to teach in places where much of the audience was only listening in the most perfunctory way, where some were carrying on conversations while he spoke and some had alcohol on their breath.

Luang Por made an exception to his refusal to accept invitations outside the monastery in the case of merit-making ceremonies at the homes of

long-time lay supporters. On such auspicious occasions – a wedding or moving into a new house, for example – it was customary for lay Buddhists to invite monks to receive their daily meal in their house, and to chant auspicious verses of blessing for the family and assembled friends and relatives. Luang Por accepted such invitations as a gesture of appreciation for long and devoted support for the monastery. He would administer the Five Precepts, lead the auspicious chanting and, after receiving gifts of food and requisites, would deliver a rousing Dhamma talk. Finally, before leaving, he would sprinkle lustral water on everyone's heads to the sound of the monks chanting the 'Jayanto' protection verses. These were occasions that the families involved would always treasure.

In his fifties, Luang Por contracted diabetes. It strengthened his disinclination to accept invitations outside the monastery, as the increased need to urinate made sitting for long periods impractical. It was for this reason that he was willing to endure the criticisms that resulted from declining highly prestigious invitations from the King and Queen to attend functions at the Royal Palace in Bangkok.

### III. SAMMĀDITṬHI

*I see no other single dhamma that is such a cause for the arising of wholesome dhammas that have not yet arisen or for the growth and maturation of those that have already arisen as Right View.*

AN 1.299-300

'Sammāditṭhi' is usually translated into English as 'Right View'. The prefix 'right' means 'in harmony with the way things are'; 'view' includes opinions, beliefs, values, theories and philosophies. A right view is thus one that corresponds to reality; the conviction, for example, that acts of generosity lead to happiness – would be considered a 'right view'. Right View is the first constituent of the Noble Eightfold Path and is indispensable for the development of the other seven factors. At its most basic level, Right View consists of the adoption of a certain number of principles – most importantly, the law of kamma – as basic premises or working hypotheses to be relied upon in walking the Buddhist path. On

this level, it is referred to as ‘Mundane Right View’. The culmination of the path – an understanding of the Four Noble Truths as a direct experience – is known as ‘Transcendental Right View’.

Unsurprisingly, given the central importance of Right View as the foundation on which all Buddhist practice is to be established, teachings aimed at explaining it constituted a large proportion of Luang Por’s discourses to the lay community. Right View is, he said, like the cool place unreachéd by the burning sun. It is our true refuge.

Our refuge is the mind that possesses Right View. See into the heart of things. Make your view straight and correct. Then wrong views will be unable to enter into your mind and mingle with it. That is the meaning of a refuge.

Suffering arises whenever there is an incorrect understanding of the way things are. Therefore, Luang Por would emphasize, establishing Right View was the first step to the transcendence of suffering.

If your view of things is correct, if it is sammāditṭhi, then nothing can go awry; that is to say, when your way of looking at things is in accord with the true nature of things, then you experience nothing as an obstruction. Your mind remains calm and contented, and problems are resolved.

Without the effort to look closely at the mind, it is difficult to find the motivation to give up mistaken views.

Until then, you’re like somebody who drinks alcohol. Nobody can stop such a person from drinking until he sees for himself the undesirable consequences of his habit.

So, here we change a mistaken view into a correct one, change evil into goodness, and change an unenlightened being into a Noble One. It is Right View that is responsible for these changes. These kinds of changes for the better are called ‘merit’.

He said that people with wrong view had a false kind of contentment, similar to the ease of somebody who doesn’t realize that they have dropped a valuable possession. Right View gave the same kind of inner ease as that

experienced by somebody who remembered the exact location of a lost valuable and knew how he was going to retrieve it. Although the object was not yet in his possession, his mind was at ease. On another occasion, he compared Right View to the key that opened the door to the Dhamma. Without that key, there was no way in.

## KAMMA

Much of Luang Por's Dhamma teaching was devoted to instilling confidence in the law of kamma, the central constituent of Mundane Right View. Most frequently, he expounded upon the simple formulation of that law familiar to all Thai Buddhists: 'Do good, get good results. Do bad, get bad results.' While the brevity of this version of the formula makes for easy memorization, it also gives ample room for wrong views to accumulate. A common cause of doubt amongst lay Buddhists was that the teaching seemed to contradict everyday experience. So many people who did a lot of good things never saw any good come from it, they said, whereas people who did bad things seemed to prosper everywhere you looked. Luang Por never tired in explaining how the good that results from good actions is not to be understood in terms of worldly notions of good fortune. If someone was disappointed that an act of generosity had borne no good results, then the act itself must have been performed with a desire for some reward.

If you give something away with a wish for something in return,  
then it's not true giving.

Luang Por explained that people who doubt that good actions lead to good results simply don't understand what the Buddha means by 'good results'. On one occasion, Luang Por said:

In my life, I've never once got a bad result from a good action. At the moment that I've done anything good, I've always got a good result immediately, there and then.

In other words, the wholesome qualities of mind present in a good action were strengthened by the act, and that strengthening was the immediate reward.

I'll give you an example. Suppose you have a friend who is poor and you take him in, look after him, give him money, an education, until finally he is able to get a job, support himself and, in time, gain success in his career. Sometime later you fall onto hard times and become impoverished. This fellow doesn't come to visit you and makes no attempt to help you out and repay you for your kindness to him. You feel angry about this and you think, 'I performed a good action but received no good results from it. Why on earth did the Buddha teach that good actions have good results?'

That would be a foolish way to look at what happened. In helping out that man, your mind was good and just and noble, and the growth in those good qualities are your reward. The fact that he doesn't repay your kindness is his own affair. It's nothing to do with you, it's his own bad action. You'd be a fool to take the bad action of someone else into your heart. No good can come from that.

He went on to give another example as to why the more obvious results of good actions can be disappointing:

Say a person goes to work with a certain group of people – perhaps she is a manager, a director of an institution, a headmistress or whatever – and does a great deal of good. She does the best that can be done, but, in the conventional sense, doesn't get much good out of it: people gossip about her behind her back, criticize her, stir up trouble for her. As time goes on, she seems to have received no good results from her work, only criticism. The person feels discouraged, she doesn't want to go on. She thinks that the Buddha taught that good actions have good results but that it hasn't worked out like that. Perhaps she rebukes the Buddha for lying. Or she thinks the Buddha got it wrong. In fact, it's she herself that is wrong. She has not reflected on all the conditioning factors involved.

Good actions will only have good results immediately in the absence of opposing forces. A good seed sown in poor soil or in a time of drought, for instance, is unlikely to produce a good plant.

The Buddha taught that good actions have good results, and anyone who commits a bad action gets a bad result. When you're determined to do good and go to work as part of a group of unprincipled and immoral people, goodness will be unable to manifest. Why is it that, no matter how much good we do, the results won't appear in that place? Because the time does not allow it, the place does not allow it, the people do not allow it. That is an example of the way that the good results do not appear. The goodness will only appear there and then if the action is good, the place is good, the time is appropriate and the person and group fulfil all the conditions ...

That good actions have good results and bad actions have bad results is an unchanging law. We don't see it because of our own wrong thinking.

#### OPPOSING WRONG VIEWS

At the same time as explaining the nature of Right View, Luang Por pointed out the fallacies he saw in beliefs and practices that were in conflict with it. In the first few years after he established Wat Pah Pong, animist beliefs were still strong in the area around the monastery, and Luang Por was resolute in his attempts to show how such beliefs were ill-founded and brought no real peace.

Animism has always lived alongside Buddhism in Thailand. Just as in the human world, powerless Thais have always sought to align themselves with powerful patrons, so in their relationship to the spiritual world have many sought protection and gain from the powerful unseen forces believed to abound. Making offerings to powerful spirits to placate them or in the hope of enlisting their support in the attainment of certain goals has not been seen as a religious practice, but as a common-sense strategy in a world of both material and unseen forces. To Luang Por, however, such devotions were superstitions that undermined true refuge in the

Triple Gem. At the same time as his prestige and the teachings he gave grew in influence, so did belief in his spiritual potency. As a result, animist influences in the area around Wat Pah Pong declined. Por Nudaeng was a local man who became one of Luang Por's staunchest lay supporters after abandoning his former beliefs:

“Luang Por taught us not to look on spirits as our refuge, not to be gullible and superstitious and not to believe that there are auspicious and inauspicious times for doing things. He said on whatever day you have the opportunity to do something good, if it’s convenient and pleasant, and there are no obstructions – then that is a good day. My family were all inspired by Luang Por’s teachings. When we tried out what he said we got results. It gave me confidence and faith in his reasoning and inspired me to practise according to his teachings.”

Por Nudaeng’s family had always been nominally Buddhist. They regularly went to make merit in the local monasteries, but they had only the most superficial understanding of Buddhist teachings.

“It all started with my wife. She was a medium. My grandparents had all worshipped a kind of spirit called *pee tai* which they believed was a refuge that could protect them from every danger and misfortune. Their beliefs were passed down to my generation. It’s a depressing story. It’s as if we were fools who’d volunteered to be somebody’s slaves. And it wasn’t easy to give up, it was a real wrench.”

Por Nudaeng, at his wits end as to how to free himself from the thralls of this spirit, went to pay his respects to Luang Por.

“I asked him what we could do so that the *pee tai* would leave my family alone. We sat talking about it at his kuti until two in the morning. His advice was that my wife and I should keep the Five Precepts strictly for three months, chant the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha every day and develop mettā meditation. We should spread kind thoughts to all sentient beings that are in distress – those living in houses, living in trees, in the mountains, everywhere. We should radiate kindness to all our companions in the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death, wishing they would bear no enmity against each other.

“In those days, I was pretty poor and my house was just a small hut. I wanted to invite Luang Por and some of his monks to take a meal there, but I was afraid it would be inconvenient for them. He said, ‘Is it big enough for five monks to sit down in?’ I said it was and he said, ‘Then we can go! If you don’t have any money to buy food to eat with the rice, don’t worry, just boil up some cassia leaves and make a curry. That would be fine.’”

A few days later, Luang Por took a group of monks to Por Nudaeng’s house. Before the meal offering, they chanted auspicious verses of blessing, and after it Luang Por gave a talk to the extended family and friends, in which he expanded upon the advice he had given Por Nudaeng.

“Because of the respect I felt for Luang Por I did all of what he suggested. My wife and I were able to keep the Five Precepts purely for the whole of the three months. In fact, I’ve kept them ever since. I was thirty-six then, and now I’m almost seventy.

“From the day that Luang Por came to our house, no spirit ever appeared again. There were a lot of other households in the village that had lost their faith in the power of the spirits and wanted to get rid of them and give up their devotions. When the news got around about our success, a lot of people who had never been interested in the monastery before started to go to pay respects to Luang Por, and soon there were more invitations for him to take his meal in the village. After he’d finish his meal, he would teach them to take the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha as their refuge, and then there would be a *chak bangsukun*\* ceremony. When Luang Por left the house, he would have the host take the spirit house along and have him burn it by the side of the road as soon as they were out of the village. So, that was the end of the problem. We’ve lived peacefully ever since, and no spirits have come to trouble us.”

One of the more bizarre beliefs still to be found in Northeast Thailand during Luang Por’s lifetime, was that termite mounds were holy and able to grant all kinds of wishes for health, wealth and protection. On this topic, Luang Por pulled no punches:

\*A short ritual in which the layperson, covered by white cloth, symbolically dies to his bad habits or bad luck and makes a fresh start. It was one of the rituals that Luang Por agreed to conduct after giving a talk explaining the causes and conditions for making a fresh start in life.

When your grandchildren get bigger you take them to bow to a termite mound in the forest. It looks strange, you think, so it must have some sacred power. You bow to it and start muttering away with your requests. What you're really doing is asking a pile of termite shit to make you rich.

Sometimes, a termite mound comes up underneath someone's house and they're overjoyed. They rush off to get a monk's robe to wrap around the mound; they go and get some flowers to offer to it. Meanwhile the termites go on making their home bigger and bigger. In the end, the owners of the house have nowhere to live because it's full of holy paraphernalia. They don't know where to live in their own home, and so what do they do? They pray to the termite mound for guidance. It's the deepest pit of delusion.

## ASTROLOGY

Few Thais see a conflict between a belief in astrology and their identity as Buddhists. As with animist practices, the two things are usually seen as occupying different spheres of influence. The underlying assumption is that if life is a venture fraught with dangers, it makes sense to use whatever means lie at one's disposal in order to maximize the chances of survival and success. If astrology provides access to useful inside information, one would be foolish to ignore it. The assumption that astrology and Dhamma are compatible has been strengthened by the number of respected monks in urban monasteries who, over the centuries, have disregarded the Vinaya prohibition, studied astrology and offered advice based on their charts to lay supporters.

One of the most common occasions on which an astrologer is consulted is to ascertain the most auspicious date on which to stage an important event, such as a business deal, a wedding or an Ordination. This kind of custom may seem relatively benign, even charming. However, for Buddhist teachers like Luang Por, it was important to point out how a belief in the influence of the constellations, is in conflict with the most basic tenets of the Dhamma.

Luang Por held that consulting an astrologer presumes a rejection of the Buddha's teaching that the auspiciousness of an action is determined not by an alignment of the stars, but by the virtuous qualities that the actor brings to it. In other words, a belief in astrology as a guide to action in the world is a denial of the law of kamma, and thus an undermining of Right View. Luang Por observed that the fascination with astrology was bound up with fear of change:

They're afraid: afraid something or other is going to happen to them – afraid of this, afraid of that – because they lack a firm faith in the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

He insisted that our life is the result of our actions. He would quote the Buddha's words: 'We are born of our kamma. Our life abides supported by our kamma. It is our refuge.' Fearful, gullible people who are worried about the future, go to see an astrologer, he said, and are told, 'This year you should be careful. If you go on a journey, beware of an accident.' In fact, Luang Por said, whatever day you go on a journey, the most likely cause of an accident is your own behaviour:

Civil servants who've been posted from Ubon back to Bangkok or to another province come to see me and ask: 'Luang Por, what would be a good day to leave?' I tell them that if they leave in a good way then every day is a good day. Usually when civil servants take up new postings they give a farewell party and everyone gets drunk. That's not a good way to leave; if they're not careful, they'll drive into a ditch.

Establishing firm confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, he said, gives clear guidelines for conduct:

Don't be swayed by hearsay about what is auspicious – to do so is in itself inauspicious. People talk among themselves, reinforcing each other's claims and before you know it, they've decided the water in some pond is holy and they've started drinking it. It's not good to get carried away with these things. The Buddha taught us to develop a wise reserve. When people start enthusing about things being holy and auspicious, simply listen with an open mind.

On another occasion, giving advice to a young couple on their wedding day, he said:

People consult an astrologer. They get married on an auspicious day, the monks chant the blessing at an auspicious time and so on. But within a week they can be at loggerheads or bickering, with no interest at all as to whether it's a good day for it or not. When people start quarrelling, then the astrological concurrences or the day of the week can't restrain them. The auspicious cotton threads tied around their wrists at the wedding don't help; nothing can withstand their emotions.

It's only through trying to create goodness, learning to know what goodness is, that we become good. What date should you get married? What date should you move into a new house? Well, is everything prepared? Is it an appropriate time? Have you got enough money? If the external conditions are fulfilled, then it's a good time. But whether or not the year is good, the month good, the day good, the time of day good, it is good actions alone that make people good.

#### LOTTERY NUMBERS

Thailand shares the world-wide love of lotteries. In the countryside, villagers prefer to play an underground version in which bets are laid with local bookkeepers on the last two or three numbers of the national lottery. It is widely believed that monks who have developed deep states of meditative calm are able to predict these numbers. It is by no means as outlandish a notion as might be imagined. In fact, certain monks have shown an ability to make a string of uncannily accurate predictions. The unfortunate repercussions are to be seen in the people whose foremost reason for going to the monastery is a hope of getting the next lottery numbers, rather than the cultivation of generosity, precepts and meditation.

As the Vinaya prohibits monks from promoting any form of gambling, monastics who wish to pass on lottery numbers give broad hints or smuggle them into Dhamma talks. Some people listen to discourses

straining for numbers, and given that the Buddha's teaching is often couched in lists, they are seldom disappointed. Many lay Buddhists who do not listen to talks specifically for numbers, consider it lucky to take their twice-monthly number from the mouth of their teacher. What could be more lucky? The teacher announces that he will be away from the monastery from the third until the seventh of the month and a certain proportion of his audience cannot help but make a mental note: 37.

Over the years, many people enjoyed large winnings on the lottery which they attributed to the kindness of Luang Por, despite his insistence that he would never promote gambling in such a fashion. Logical fallacies may contribute much to such a belief. One syllogism holds that monks share lottery numbers because they feel compassion for the poverty of their disciples who have no other way to make money. Luang Por is greatly compassionate. Therefore, Luang Por must intend to reveal the numbers that appear to him during his meditation.

Luang Por's concern was with the bad kamma created by people entering monasteries seeking material gain. In the early days, when people came to ask for lottery numbers, Luang Por would scowl at them. Cowed, the applicant would slink away. But to those close to him, Luang Por said:

I can't tell you. Even if I did know, I couldn't tell you. Gambling is a 'path to ruin'. Afterwards, you'd come to grief.

The coded or polite way of asking a monk for lottery numbers is to ask for 'something good'. One particularly insistent man would not take no for an answer. Finally, Luang Por smiled and said:

Something good? You're doing fine. You haven't got scabies, you haven't got ring-worm, you haven't got leprosy. You're already doing very well.

Another time a layperson came to make offerings to Luang Por with the hope that Luang Por would give him the lottery number in return. He made a formal *pavāraṇā* invitation, requesting permission to provide anything at all that Luang Por needed. He would also bring a regular supply of good food and fine requisites for the monks. Luang Por listened in silence. After he left, Luang Por said to the monks:

Beware of that one. Don't be swayed by his big pots of curry.

Some days later, after the latest lottery draw, the layman returned, looking glum and resentful. He said that he'd invested a lot of money in the monastery, and he wasn't even breaking even. When would Luang Por give him the numbers? Luang Por replied bluntly:

What do you think I am? Your servant? If you have any respect for me, why are you talking like that? If that's your reason for coming to the monastery, then you've come in the wrong way.

The layman disappeared for three or four days. He returned with a tray of flowers, candles and incense to ask for forgiveness.

The sixteenth of January, 1993 was the day of Luang Por's cremation. It was also Lottery day. In the preceding week, there had been an unprecedented surge of bets on 16 throughout the towns and villages of Ubon and beyond. It was with a weird sense of inevitability that, when the announcement of the national lottery draw was made over the radio, the last two numbers were, sure enough, 1 and 6. It became known as Luang Por's farewell gift to the people of Isan.

#### LUSTRAL WATER

Lustral water is generally understood to be water that a monk has chanted over and invested with psychic energy. It is widely believed that lustral water prepared by an enlightened monk possesses miraculous potency. Many laypeople came to Wat Pah Pong with the hope that Luang Por would sprinkle lustral water over their heads before they departed. For a long time, Luang Por would resist such requests, but in later years he became more tolerant. Although he insisted that he was using ordinary water, his guests would plead with him to sprinkle it over them anyway. The tangible connection provided by this ritual proved such a joyful and moving experience for its recipients that Luang Por often did not have the heart to refuse it.

One day, just before taking leave of Luang Por, a guest crawled towards Luang Por and, prostrating himself at Luang Por's feet, asked to be

sprinkled with lustral water. After a moment, Luang Por said, 'I haven't boiled any water today.' The man looked up with a baffled look on his face.

People come and ask to be sprinkled with lustral water, and I've been thinking that it might be a good idea to do it with boiling water. People's defilements are so callous that it might be a good idea to blister them a bit, make the teaching hurt. I tell people to meditate, and they won't do it. All they want is lustral water to ease some problem, relax some tension. And I sprinkle their heads in a perfunctory way. But if they come again, I'll do it with boiling water. People are so childish. What can lustral water do to help you? If people get what they want, they laugh; if they don't, they cry. Everyone is the same. That's why there are so many fools in the world. Intelligent people come here to seek the way out of suffering, to seek the path of practice that will give rise to true wisdom in order to know Dhamma, to realize Dhamma in their hearts. They have peaceful minds and teach themselves all the time. They have a deep sense of well-being. They don't have to laugh, and they don't have to cry.

Sometimes the people who came to visit Luang Por had become so intoxicated by their studies of the Dhamma, that rather than receive teachings from him, they could not help but show off their knowledge. In extreme cases, where words would have little effect, Luang Por might simply sit in silence, patient and still. If the voluble layman (it was always a man) was a person of rank (he almost always was), Luang Por might say a few words before the man left that would not embarrass him in public, but would give him food for thought.

This was the case on one occasion when a senior army officer accompanied by his entourage came to visit Luang Por. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, the man began to expound on Dhamma at great length, quoting by heart from the Buddha's discourses. Some two hours passed with Luang Por hardly speaking a word. Finally, the army officer said:

*Army officer:* Luang Por, we would like to ask to take our leave now.  
Please sprinkle us with lustral water before we go.

*Luang Por:* I already have.

*Army officer:* When was that? I'd know about it if you had.

*Luang Por:* I've been sprinkling for the last two hours. Didn't you feel anything?

The army officer had read and remembered the gist of many books, but his look of confusion revealed that he had no understanding of the nature of blessings.

One amongst many lustral water stories concerns Luang Por's teacher, Luang Pu Kinaree, who at the end of his life found it hard to co-ordinate his limbs. Placed in front of him as he spoke to his guests, would be a bowl of lustral water for blessings and his spittoon, usually containing red betel nut saliva. One day, some laypeople asked for lustral water and he mistakenly dipped the wand in the spittoon and sprinkled them with red saliva. When they shouted out his mistake, he said simply:

“Betel nut saliva. Lustral water. Same thing.”

## AMULETS

Amulets engraved with images of the Buddha or of revered monks have long been treasured by Thai lay Buddhists. They are worn like crucifixes around the neck. It is widely believed that such amulets may be empowered by monks with psychic powers and provide protection against harm. There are many stories of people wearing such amulets becoming immune to bullets and knives. Unsurprisingly, they have always been highly sought after by soldiers and gangsters.

Amulets may be commissioned by groups of disciples of a teacher, or by monasteries in order to raise funds. Over time a market has developed. Newly minted amulets are advertised in full-page advertisements in the daily newspapers. People collect, buy and sell amulets on a large scale. Rare amulets change hands for thousands of dollars. Amulets have become big business providing large rewards, and the participation in this business by monks has been a cause of corruption in the monastic order.

Luang Por was not against amulets as such, particularly if they were engraved with images of the Buddha rather than of individual monks. He also never denied that it was possible for amulets to be empowered.

He was, however, opposed to amulets being taken as a refuge higher and more efficacious than the Triple Gem. In the case that people acquired an amulet they believed could ward off danger, they often became heedless, convinced that even if they acted badly, the amulet would protect them from the consequences. He saw increasing numbers of people paying more attention to the religious symbols themselves, than to the things they were supposed to symbolize. Many senior monks now give amulets with their own image engraved upon them as gifts to visitors. But when guests at Wat Pah Pong asked if Luang Por had an amulet for them in the accepted polite phrase, ‘Luang Por, do you have any good things?’ He would reply:

I don’t have any ‘good things’. Or if I have, it is something that is better than all good things – and that is Dhamma. Those who practise Dhamma can protect themselves.

More and more people came to Wat Pah Pong with requests for permission to produce Luang Por Chah medallions. Once minted, they said, they would offer them to Luang Por to distribute as he saw fit. Many of Luang Pu Mun’s other great disciples had already agreed, they would add, his disciples would appreciate it so much. But Luang Por would not be moved.

He maintained his position on medallions with tact and diplomacy. On one occasion, a high-powered group of laypeople led by an influential politician came from Bangkok to see him. They said that people all over the country had great respect for Luang Por; it would be greatly auspicious if Luang Por would allow them to produce medallions with his image on them; so many people wanted to have some small memento of him to which they could pay their respects. It seemed that the group was acting with pure intentions, and given the social status of its members, a number of monks thought that this time Luang Por would finally relent. Instead, he informed his guests that it would only be possible with the permission of the Sangha.

At the next Sangha meeting, Luang Por raised the issue of the medallions and detailed all of the undesirable consequences of agreeing to the request. He then asked if members of the Sangha could think of any further good or bad points of the proposal. Nobody could. Finally, a

unanimous decision was made to refuse permission. Luang Por informed the lay group that the Sangha would not allow the medallions to be made.

Eventually, a group of lay supporters made a batch of Luang Por Chah medallions without asking his permission first, and arrived in the monastery together with their proud offering. Faced with a *fait accompli*, Luang Por accepted the medallions and distributed them amongst his closest disciples, but afterwards made it clear that he absolutely forbade such productions in the future. It ran against everything that he was trying to teach the laypeople; he didn't want them to get attached to such things. He was also aware that before long such medallions became merchandise, the subject of buying and selling and bartering and even of theft. Instead of easing the stress and turmoil in the owner's mind, medallions were as likely to have the opposite effect. On one further occasion, he had the vast majority of medallions produced without his permission buried underneath the Uposatha Hall.

## CEREMONIES

In the Buddha's time, belief in the purificatory power of ritual was a central tenet of the Brahmanist tradition that the Buddha roundly rejected. He maintained that true purification could only be realized through a systematic training of body, speech and mind. It was not, however, that ritual was to be completely eschewed; its psychological benefits were recognized and harnessed for the benefit of Dhamma practice. Luang Por Chah was adept at using ritual in appropriate circumstances, but he was resolute in his opposition to the belief that there was some inherent sanctity in ritual independent of the mental states of the participants.

Luang Por was diplomatic and accommodated non-Buddhist (usually Brahmanistic) customs that did not clash with Buddhist values. On special occasions, perhaps when close lay supporters were celebrating a move into a new house or a marriage, he would accept invitations to take his daily meal at their house. There, he would have no objections to the white *saisin* thread, tied to the Buddha image at one end, being passed down the line of monks and being held by them as they chanted verses of blessing. During the chanting, he himself would perform the ritual of creating 'lustral water' by guiding the wax from a burning candle into

a vessel of water. Before leaving the house, to the delight of all, he would sprinkle this water over all the assembled family and friends. He acknowledged their wish to uphold the customs that defined their culture. He also recognized how ceremonies and rituals gave a sense of occasion and provided an emotional impact that made an event a memorable and fitting marker of a major life-change. But Luang Por never gave these things central stage. The main focus of his visit to a household was always the Dhamma talk he gave after the meal.

Tattooing the body with mystic symbols as a protection against misfortune was one custom in which Luang Por could see no redeeming features. The belief that inked skin rather than a judicious mind kept one free from suffering, he considered to be a particularly clear example of a misguided superstition – one which he, as a teenager, had shared. The pain and expense of tattooing for protection (tattooing for cosmetic reasons was uncommon in his time) he considered quite pointless:

In the old days when men got to the age of nineteen or twenty it was the custom for them to get their legs tattooed. They were willing to do it no matter how much it hurt. It would start from the morning and go on steadily – ‘tuup tuup tuup tuup’ – throughout the day. Their blood would be flowing and they’d have to keep driving away the flies. But they’d carry on even though they were in agony – because they believed.

And that, he said, was precisely the danger of belief: the willingness to endure and persevere in the absurd.

Luang Por’s criticisms of local traditions were not based upon a view that having a good time was in itself somehow sinful, only that it should be acknowledged for what it was, and not be dignified by a spurious religious authority. He said that it was a travesty to call annual rocket ceremonies with all the drunkenness and frequent accidents they entailed, a ‘merit-making’ event. ‘Nobody becomes a good person through banging a drum’, he once said wryly. His teachings on the topic may be summed up as, ‘You can’t make something virtuous just by calling it so.’ This was the hub of his criticism: when so-called ‘merit-making’ ceremonies included drunken carousing, then the understanding of merit, and thus of Right

View, in the community was undermined. He sympathized with hard working villagers wanting to let off steam every now and again, but as a monk it was his duty to clarify and protect Buddhist values.

Luang Por constantly challenged people to step back from their daily struggles in order to gain an overview of their lives: he said that if you didn't do that, you could get to your old age without ever realizing what it means to be a human being. He once related speaking with a group of elderly people and asking them about themselves:

You've all spent your lives striving for money and possessions and now you're old and close to death. So, what do you think is truly worth getting in this world? Where's it to be found?

He said that he asked many members of the group, and found them bemused by the question. The answer he received most often was, 'I don't really know.' He gave them his answer:

What you truly get from your life is the goodness and badness that you take with you into the next. Our minds embed themselves in the things they give meaning to and value: the wholesome and unwholesome, the meritorious and the demeritorious. These are the things – the merit and demerit, goodness and badness – that the Buddha said we take with us. All that you've created in the world belongs to the world. Although you've cut down a tree in the forest and built a house from it, every part of that house is the property of the world, you can't take it with you. Some people aren't aware of what truly belongs to them and what doesn't. What belongs to them is the goodness or badness that generates their actions.

He continued:

Peace, clarity and purity – these are the things that human beings really need because they are what we can take with us. Wherever goodness arises, then bounty and happiness follow. Wherever a wise person goes, he creates lasting progress. Even if he starts farming on poor soil, he can make it good and productive.

Since the days of the Buddha, people with faith in his teachings have declared their commitment to them by affirming three times:

*Buddham saraṇam gacchāmi: I go for refuge to the Buddha.*

*Dhammam saraṇam gacchāmi: I go for refuge to the Dhamma.*

*Sangham saraṇam gacchāmi: I go for refuge to the Sangha.*

Most simply put, taking refuge in the Buddha means looking to the Buddha as the supreme teacher of the path to peace, compassion and wisdom. Taking refuge in the Dhamma means taking the Buddha's teachings as the supreme map of that path. Taking refuge in the Sangha means taking the enlightened disciples of the Buddha as supreme leaders on the path, examples that the path is possible to follow and explainers of it.

There is also a more profound way of understanding these three objects of refuge. Luang Por taught that the meaning of the Triple Gem has a transcendental dimension; that the three objects of refuge refer also to timeless immaterial qualities that may be realized in each person's mind. In this sense, the Buddha refers to 'inner awakening', the Dhamma to the 'way things are', and the Sangha to 'the right practice leading to awakening'.

Throughout his teaching career, Luang Por sought to encourage lay Buddhists to go beyond a merely superficial affiliation with their religion, expressed in material support for the monastic order and ritual observances. His concern was that they should learn how to use the Buddha's teachings to reduce suffering and increase the quality of their lives. He did this by bringing the teachings down to earth, expressing them in the vernacular, and revealing them as tools to be used in daily life, rather than as objects of reverence. This strategy is clearly revealed in the way that Luang Por spoke about the three refuges. He emphasized that 'Buddha' does not only refer to the founder of the religion who, some 2500 years ago, lived in India. As it was his realization of the Dhamma that transformed Siddhattha Gotama into the Buddha, his Buddha nature and the Dhamma were one and the same thing.

When you see the Dhamma, you see the Buddha, and all your doubts vanish. The Buddha is the Dhamma; the Dhamma is the Buddha. The historical Buddha did not take enlightenment with him. He left it right here.

Therefore, as the Dhamma is timeless, Luang Por insisted it is still as accessible to one who follows the Buddha's teachings as it ever was:

The Buddha is still present today. The Buddha is the truth. The truth is always present. No matter who is born and who dies, the truth remains the same. It never disappears from the world. It's always here in exactly this way.

Seeking to express this idea to a group of teachers, he drew an analogy: there is a body of knowledge and skills that once mastered, allows people to make a living as a teacher. People become teachers for a number of years and then retire. But the knowledge and skills that made them teachers remain.

Similarly, the truth that makes a human being a Buddha still exists, it hasn't disappeared. Two Buddhas are born: one is physical and the other immaterial. As for the true Dhamma, the Buddha said, 'Ānanda, keep practising; you will thrive in the Dhamma-Vinaya. Whoever sees the Dhamma sees me. Whoever sees me sees the Dhamma.' How could that be? It sounds as if the Buddha and the Dhamma are being mixed up and made into the same thing. Actually, to begin with, there was no Buddha. The Buddha could only be called by the name of 'Buddha' when he realized the Dhamma. Before that he was Prince Siddhattha. It's like all of you. Now you're just unenlightened village folk, but if you were to realize the true Dhamma, then you'd be exactly the same as the Buddha. There would be no difference. So, understand this point – all of you – right now: the Buddha is still present.

Luang Por found the belief, originating in scholarly circles, that it is no longer possible in the present day and age to realize enlightenment, to be a pernicious one. He spoke grimly of the kamma created by scholars who criticized those putting effort into practice of the teachings as wasting

their time. He considered the holders of such a view like fools who conclude that because they can see no water beneath their feet, that there can be none beneath the earth they stand on.

To put it simply, practice is like digging a well. In the Buddha's time, they dug down into the earth in order to find water. When they met roots or rocks, they removed them and eventually they reached water. There was no need to create the water; all they had to do was dig the well to access it. In the present day, you can dig a well in order to get water in exactly the same way. Whenever you get down to the water-bearing strata, you'll find water.

## MERIT

The accepted English translation of the important Pali word '*puñña*' is 'merit' (Thai: '*boon*'). The rationale for this rather puzzling rendering is given by the great contemporary scholar, Bhikkhu Bodhi: '... the tenor of our inner being must be raised to a pitch where it is fit for the reception of some new disclosure of the truth ... We can only grasp what we are fit to grasp, and our fitness is largely a function of our character. The existential comprehension of truth thus becomes a matter of inward worth, of deservingness, or of merit ... The capacity to comprehend truths pertaining to the spiritual order is always proportional to the store and quality of the merit.'

'Making merit' is the most popular religious practice of Thai lay Buddhists, and as such, has, over the centuries, been the most misconceived and most subject to distortion. To this day in Buddhist communities, the knowledge that '*puñña*' means 'that which cleanses the mind' (in most cases equivalent to 'good kamma') is far less widespread than might be expected.

The Buddha taught that cleansing of the mind takes place through three main activities: acts of generosity (cleansing the mind of attachment to material possessions), moral virtue (cleansing the mind of the intention to harm self and others) and mental cultivation (systematically cleansing the mind of defilements). This last was considered by far the most

powerful source of purification. A single moment of deep inner peace was said to create more merit than an offering of alms to the Buddha himself.

Over the centuries, the Thai lay Buddhist community as a whole came to put an overriding emphasis on the first kind of merit-making activity: acts of generosity. The meaning of ‘making merit’ shrunk to offerings of material support to the Sangha. The focus shifted from the inner cleansing of mind to the outer activity that was believed to produce it. Once ‘merit’ was located in the activity rather than the mental cleansing, all kinds of corruption could occur. Unskilful acts such as drinking alcohol and killing a cow or a pig for a feast in a ‘merit-making’ ceremony crept into Buddhist communities. Unscrupulous monks taught that ‘merit’ was to be measured by the amount of money offered to the Sangha (a phenomenon that unfortunately flourishes to this day).

Throughout his teaching career, Luang Por devoted himself to explaining the true meaning of ‘merit’ and to encouraging his disciples to apply themselves to all three kinds of merit, particularly the most neglected area: the cultivation of the mind.

Luang Por did not, however, disparage those who felt unready to apply themselves to meditation practice. It has always been the case in Buddhist societies that most householders view the direct path to enlightenment as too steep and rugged for them to climb. They have considered the gradual accumulation of merit as a more realistic and less unsettling option. Through honesty, kindness, generosity and virtue, they seek to increase their merit in a way that combines a gradual spiritual cleansing with the more familiar worldly fruits of a happy family life and worldly success, both in this world and the next. Although this attitude was accepted by the Buddha as a rational and a legitimate choice, ultimately, it was a waste of the opportunities for profound spiritual progress afforded by a precious human birth.

Luang Por recognized that good health, a stable and happy family life, a fulfilling career, a measure of inner peace and the confidence in a good rebirth awaiting after death, would always be the basic goals of most people in the world. It was the role of merit in promoting the attainment of those goals that needed to be clarified. With a wrong understanding,

bad kamma could be performed in the belief that merit was being made, while good kamma could be neglected in the belief that it was too difficult to create.

Luang Por warned that all merit-making acts, beginning with generosity, needed to be performed with awareness. Donors should consider whether their gift would be appropriate for a monk and allowable for him to use. If giving was primarily motivated by desire for praise or reputation or a material reward of some kind, much of the inner cleansing would be nullified. The act of generosity would be little more than a transaction. The admirable impulse of generosity needed to be accompanied by the effort to train the mind. It was the wise means to maximize the merit. On one occasion, Luang Por said to a large group of visitors:

These days everyone wants to make merit, but hardly anybody wants to abandon demerit. In fact, these two things are inseparable.

Luang Por said that a love of making merit unaccompanied by the determination to abandon harmful actions of body, speech and mind, demonstrated a lack of understanding of what merit really was, what supported it and what undermined it. He often explained this point through use of the word ‘kusala’, usually translated into English as ‘wholesome’ or ‘skilful’ (and assumed by most Thai lay Buddhists to be synonymous with ‘merit’). In fact, Luang Por explained, kusala was a wisdom factor that was needed to govern the performance of meritorious acts. Without this kind of wisdom, people could become overly concerned with the anticipated future rewards of their good actions or be influenced by desire for praise or good name in their community. Many would simply bask in the good feelings produced by their good actions and see no need to penetrate any further into the Buddha’s teachings.

Wisdom was needed to avoid problems. Without knowledge of how to look after their minds, the good kamma they had created would be vulnerable to corruption.

Make merit in order to gradually reduce the suffering in your mind. To do that you must, at the same time, develop wholesome qualities in your mind ... Merit by itself is just like fresh meat or

fish. If you leave it around too long, it will go rotten. If you want to keep it for a long time, you have to salt it or put it in the fridge. As you make merit, keep reflecting. By that I mean using your intelligence or wisdom to destroy defilements.

To explain the discriminative function of mind that was needed, Luang Por drew an analogy with mathematics. The idiom ‘making merit’ points to the prevailing idea of merit as simply something you create or accumulate. This he said was simplistic:

It’s rather like in mathematics where you have to use different methods: multiplying, adding, subtracting and dividing in order to get the right sum.

The mistake people made, he said, was in the zeal to add and multiply: ‘They don’t subtract and hardly ever divide.’ In fact, it is subtraction and division ‘that bring a lightness to the mind’. Luang Por’s point here was that when ‘merit’ was understood to depend upon an inner wearing away of defilement, then merit-makers enjoyed a sense of lightness whenever they let go of the burden of self-concern. When motivation had shifted to the earning of a heavenly reward or enhancing one’s standing in society, the will towards self-aggrandizement added to the weight one had to carry rather than reduced it. Luang Por often returned to this theme of carrying a burden and putting down a burden. He said that if you were on a journey and you just kept piling new gains on your back, you’d eventually collapse. You had to know when to put some down.

Share things. If you get a lump this big, then give some of it away and it will be lighter; if you keep the whole thing, it will be heavy.

Practising generosity was one of the most important factors that matured the mind and made it ready for more profound forms of renunciation, as could be seen in the many previous lives of the Buddha.

Training yourself to give is like learning to walk. Keep increasing the amount. Start with material things and as the power of giving grows stronger, you will be able to give up [attachment to] mental states, immaterial things, matters of the heart and mind and ultimately, to a giving [up] of greed, hatred and delusion,

The point Luang Por returned to again and again was that merit could not be measured by good deeds themselves, but by the mind with which they were performed. At any moment that the mind was filled with Right View, with virtuous qualities and the happiness of their presence, he said, the mind was merit:

If the mind is endowed with merit, then wherever you ‘make merit’ it will always be full of joy. There’s no need to celebrate, no need to let anyone know or see, no need for anything of that kind; there’s just the energy of the mind that believes firmly in goodness.

An unwholesome action does not become wholesome simply because everybody believes it to be so. There is a universal principle involved, independent of human perception. Similarly, a good action bears fruit even if it is not acknowledged as ‘good’ by one’s community.

The Noble Ones perform good acts. Wherever they are, they do their practice. However much other people might deny that what they’re doing is good, the goodness is there, nonetheless. When someone does something bad, no matter how good others may say it is, it’s still not good.

Making offerings at a monastery was nurturing Buddhism, but lay Buddhists were not to consider that Buddhism lay outside of themselves or was owned by the Sangha. With wisdom, nurturing one’s own life and nurturing Buddhism were not different things, because there was no Buddhism outside of the minds of practising Buddhists.

When foolish people suffered, they either became angry or depressed, or sought to forget their pain with sensual pleasures. Less foolish were those who chose to ‘make merit’ as a way of cheering the mind and bringing some goodness into their life. Nevertheless, unless they sought for the causes of their suffering and made efforts to eliminate them, making merit was only a superficial remedy.

Merit and its opposite, demerit, were not measurable entities. They were not to be found in actions. They were the names of states of mind, which each person had to identify for himself.

If you meditate and investigate within until you reach the heart itself, you will see that badness refers to the bad things in your mind and merit to the good and noble things. Badness is inner distress. If you turn the attention within, you will see merit and harm, distress and happiness, for yourself.

For our life to be complete, we need two kinds of eyes. The physical eyes see but incompletely. They can see trees and mountains and so on but they don't see right and wrong. It's like the lights on a car. Do you think that it's the lights that see the road? The same principle applies. The awareness that knows the value of things lies in the heart. We have to bring things inward, to have the inner eye.

This inner eye had to be trained and educated to counter the tendency for the mind to be deceived by sense impressions.

If we have only the external eyes, then we will be continually deceived. We'll see counterfeit things as real, unattractive things as attractive, bad things as good.

Luang Por often used this simple analogy of the inner spiritual or heavenly eye that had to complement the outer corporeal eyes. It was a concept that would have been familiar to his listeners: everyone knew that when Kondañña, the first disciple of the Buddha, realized the initial stage of enlightenment, he was proclaimed to have gained the 'Dhamma-eye'.

You've got a body and you've got a mind – everything you need. Don't go hankering after some god or other. Don't go looking elsewhere. Examine, investigate to see whether right now: is there mettā in your mind? Is there compassion? Is there sympathetic joy? Is there honesty? Is there Right View? Is there wrong view? Look at your mind. Even if you say something quite wrong, if your intention is good, then it's not wrong. Whatever you do, look at your intention. If your intention is undefiled, then there's no fault.

## REBIRTH

Those who have grown up in cultures dominated by the great monotheistic faiths tend to assume that all religious allegiances are founded upon belief in a fundamental and unique set of dogmas. Buddhism, however, does not insist on that kind of belief. Indeed, rebirth, often identified as a defining Buddhist dogma by non-Buddhists, is probably the feature of the teachings that is most controversial amongst modern Buddhists. Nevertheless, wherever there is doubt, there tends to be a desire for an authority figure to take it away. Once, a layperson who came to visit Luang Por with this desire for a definitive answer to the question of rebirth received a reply that confounded his expectations:

*Question:* Is there truly a life after this one?

*Luang Por:* If I tell you will you believe me?

*Question:* Yes, sir.

*Luang Por:* Then you'd be a fool.

Luang Por went on to explain that it is foolish to base an unquestioning belief on the words of another. As long as beliefs are based on hearsay, he said, wisdom will never arise. Such questions are impossible to finally resolve, and a cause of endless arguments and disputes.

He gave an analogy:

If you ask me, ‘Is there a future life?’ Then I ask you, ‘Is there a tomorrow? If there is, can you take me there?’ No, you can’t. Even if it exists, you can’t take me to see it. If there is today, then there must be tomorrow. But it’s not a material thing that you can pick up and hand to someone to look at.

Luang Por would remind his visitors that Buddhism is not about believing things, but about penetrating the truth of their life right now:

Actually, the Buddha didn’t teach us to expect that degree of proof. It’s not necessary to dwell on doubts about whether or not there’s a future life, or whether people are reborn – that’s not the problem you have to address. You have no obligation to

find an answer to such questions. Your obligation is to understand yourself in the present. You must know whether you are suffering. If you are, for what reason? That's what you have to know. And what's more, pursuing that knowledge is your personal responsibility.

The advice was always to return to the present moment:

The Buddha taught us to consider the present as the cause of all things. It is the cause of the future. Once today has passed by, then tomorrow will become today. The future or tomorrow comes into existence based on today. The past arises from the present as well. Once today has passed by, it becomes yesterday. This is the cause for their connection. So the Buddha taught us to reflect on all the present causes – just that is enough – because if you create good causes in the present, then the future will be good as well, and so will the past. Most importantly, if you come to an end of suffering in the present, then there's no need to speak of a future life.

This, Luang Por insisted, was in line with the way that the Buddha himself taught. As in the famous simile<sup>\*</sup>, wanting to know all of the details of rebirth was missing the point. It was like a man shot with an arrow and refusing to have it removed until being told all the characteristics of the arrow.

In the Buddha's time there was a certain brahman who wondered what happens to people after death. He went to ask the Buddha and said 'If you tell me whether or not there is rebirth, then I will ask for admission into the monkhood. If you cannot or will not tell me, then I won't.' The Buddha replied, 'What's it to me whether you become a monk or not. That's your business, not mine.' Then he said, 'Whether you become a monk or not, and whether a person is born or a person dies, whether a dead person is reborn or he is not, if you maintain this attitude, then you will suffer anguish for many more aeons. The correct thing to do is to pull out the arrow (of suffering) right now.'

<sup>\*</sup>MN 63

Questions about rebirth, said Luang Por, were based on faulty assumptions about what exactly is reborn. Ultimately, the truth of the matter is that, while there is rebirth, ‘Nobody is born and nobody dies.’ But a statement of that profundity can only be truly understood by one who has investigated and thoroughly penetrated the meaning of impermanence, suffering and not-self. Rebirth was one of the topics about which he would say, ‘Take my words away with you and reflect on them. Consider it your homework.’

There is a well-known saying in Thailand that, ‘Heaven lies in your chest, hell in your heart.’ In other words, while experiencing a strong pleasant feeling, it is as if one has been transported to a heaven realm; conversely, experiencing a strong unpleasant feeling is like being transported to a hell realm. Some radical Buddhist teachers have taken this analogy further, rejecting the basic tenets of Buddhist cosmology, and teaching that present mental pleasure and pain are the true meaning of the terms ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’.

Luang Por did not share this rejection of the literal understanding of rebirth. He did, however, make use of the heaven and hell analogy as a means of encouraging his disciples to look more closely at their actions:

These days you know all the stories about people falling into hell and going up to heaven but you don’t know about yourself. Somebody who is in good health physically and mentally, doesn’t cause harm to himself or others and feels at ease – that person is dwelling in a heaven realm. Consider this well.

Whatever place anyone commits a bad action, the Buddha called ‘hell’. Where is hell? Wherever the Buddha said, ‘Don’t do this. It’s wrong.’ If you do that thing, then the wrongness occurs immediately. That wrongness has unpleasant results, and those unpleasant results cause you to suffer. If you’re suffering, you’ve fallen into hell. Hell is the whole environment of your suffering.

The ‘Guardian of Hell’ that grabs hold of people refers to the results of the bad kamma that people have committed. Wrongness leads us on to more wrongness. This Guardian is everywhere. His eyes are wonderfully sharp. Whatever good or bad actions you

perform, he sees them all, knows all about them. Your actions are your witness, they are the evidence you leave behind; nothing is lost, nothing falls by the wayside.

But Luang Por made it clear that he was not denying the existence of heaven and hell realms as such, or rejecting the traditional representations of them. It was necessary to employ such vivid images in order to represent something beyond the scope of human imagination:

If you do something bad, then you experience bad results. You become a hell being, which is agony. You climb up a thorn tree and the thorns pierce you, but you don't ever die. When you get to the top of the tree, crows peck at your head, and you have to climb down. You get down to the bottom, and there are dogs waiting there to bite you. There's no resting place. Nothing but suffering. This manner of talking is called 'teaching by means of personification'. Is it true? Yes. It's true as a personification of things that are not material realities. For instance, 'heaven' and 'hell' are not actually physical places as they appear in the traditional descriptions. Those descriptions are metaphors.

It's like you want to explain about the taste of salt but you're in a place that has no salt. So you put down a handful of sand in front of you and agree on calling it salt for the purposes of your exposition. Does it have a salty flavour? Of course not; it's not really salt. So why do you pretend that the sand is salt? Because this place you're in has no salt. You do it in order to give people at least some idea of what salt is like.

But if the colourful descriptions of other realms are only approximations of reality, where does that leave this human realm?

Are you really human? You are in a conventional sense. If you were truly human, then you'd have to possess the human virtues such as mettā, compassion, sympathetic joy and you'd have to keep the Five Precepts the whole time. That is what it really means to be human: to possess all the virtues that confer upon you a complete humanity. Humanity has inner signs. As humans, if all these good qualities have matured within us, then

we are fully human. This is where our humanity lies; it's not that birth with eyes and ears, arms and legs and so on automatically makes us human. It looks like it, but in fact, that's a counterfeit humanity, not a true one. A true humanity demands human virtues, not causing harm to oneself or others, possessing good qualities.

#### LISTENING TO DHAMMA

The Buddha taught that listening to Dhamma talks is a great blessing. As a result, there evolved a tradition by which lay Buddhists who went to monasteries on important occasions to make merit would also ask to receive a formal teaching from the abbot. Over the centuries, however, sermons often came to play a ceremonial rather than an instructional role in peoples' lives. In Northeast Thailand, the monk would sit on the Dhamma seat and read from a palm-leaf manuscript in a stiff, formal style that included many words in the Pali language that were unintelligible to the audience. Unsurprisingly, the audience's most common response was drowsiness. Even without the Pali words, the central Thai used by educated monks in their sermons was hard to understand, and few could sustain their attention. When Luang Por heard his first Dhamma talk as a child, the common belief in his village was that understanding the meaning of the sermon was not the point.

When I was a child, my parents and grandparents would go to the monastery to listen to the Dhamma on Observance Days. They went for the merit. The monk giving the sermon would talk about this subject and that, and they wouldn't understand very much of what he was saying at all, but they sat there anyway – for the merit. They believed that hearing the sound of the monk's voice was meritorious.

In informal situations, monks spoke in dialect and expressed themselves directly. But as soon as they sat down on the elevated Dhamma seat, they would adopt an elevated tone. The forest monks like Luang Por made no such distinction. Sitting on the Dhamma seat, they spoke without preparation in much the same down-to-earth way that they spoke in daily

life. It was a small revolution in the propagation of Dhamma and returned the tradition to its long-forgotten roots.

Luang Por explained to his lay disciples the kind of attention that was needed to truly benefit from listening to the Dhamma. He taught that the attitude to a discourse, the desires and expectations, the quietness of mind of the listeners all contributed to the benefits. Listeners, he said, should adopt an attitude of humility and respect to the teacher and the teaching.

Now I am going to give you a Dhamma teaching. Pay as much attention as if the Buddha himself was sitting in front of you. Be attentive. Make your mind one. Close your eyes and sit comfortably.

But not too comfortably.

If you listen to Dhamma for the merit, you'll get drowsy. As soon as you begin to feel happy and comfortable, the drowsiness will come. When you're drowsy, then you don't know what's being said. When you don't know what's being said, you learn nothing.

Merit-making always had to be accompanied by kusala, the wisdom factor, the awareness of what leads towards and what leads away from awakening.

Listening to Dhamma should increase your intelligence. Intelligence is kusala. Kusala and merit are different things. Kusala wakes you up: it lets you know what's right and what's wrong, what's good and what's bad, what should be abandoned and what should be cultivated. 'Merit', on the other hand, is just about putting more stuff into your basket, being comfortable, enjoying yourself. It's not awakening. It doesn't like investigating Dhamma.

The benefits of listening to Dhamma with a lucidly calm and discriminating mind were seen clearly when the mind was able to retain the teachings in memory.

The Dhamma is still present in your mind. Whatever you are doing you still think of Dhamma, and Dhamma is protecting you. For instance, the monk has said that you should be patient, put forth effort, don't be cruel, make your mind good; if you become angry, then endure through it, etc. If you really pay attention so that it sticks in your mind, it will be a supporting condition. Even as you're walking along the road it's there in your mind. You arrive home and one of your children does something to annoy you. At the same moment that the annoyance arises in your mind, the Dhamma that you've heard arises with it, teaching you to patiently endure, to keep yourself in a good frame of mind, to let go. It arises simultaneously with the mental state and keeps teaching you. For such reasons, the Buddha said that the Dhamma protects us and prevents us from falling into evil ways.

## HEEDFULNESS

'*Appamāda*', commonly translated as 'heedfulness', is one of the key Buddhist virtues. The term has also been rendered as 'unremitting mindfulness' and 'vigilance'. It involves constantly bearing in mind the work that needs to be done and how little time may remain to accomplish it. Heedfulness is the antidote to complacency. It was the subject of the Buddha's last exhortation and has played a prominent part in the teachings of the great Buddhist masters through the ages, including those of Luang Por Chah.

Know what you need to do and what you need to lay down and abandon. Learn how to put your mind at ease and experience lucid calm. Learn how to stop your mind from creating suffering. This is the path of the wise person in the world. Make a firm determination to practise in a way appropriate to this human birth. Don't fritter your life away.

Luang Por urged his audiences to wake up to the preciousness of their human birth. They were to apply themselves to the task of abandoning the unwholesome qualities in their minds and developing the wholesome while they still could. It was not possible to cheat on the hard work

required by turning the mind to spiritual matters just before death and earning a last-ditch passage to a heaven realm.

Some old-timers say that when a person is about to die that you should whisper the mantra, ‘Buddho Buddho Buddho’ in their ear. What use is that? Somebody about to be laid out on a cremation pyre – what are they going to know of Buddho? Why don’t people learn about Buddho when they’re still young? Here they are, their breathing stopping and starting, calling out for their mothers, and you’re whispering, ‘Buddho’ in their ear. Why tire yourself out for no reason? Don’t bother, you’re just making them more confused.

## SĪLA

In his Dhamma discourses to lay Buddhists, Luang Por returned again and again to the fundamental importance of sīla. He explained the precepts in exhaustive detail, the reasoning behind them, the value of keeping them, the drawbacks of not doing so.

A wise sense of shame and fear of the consequences of one’s actions, these two things – they’re called *lokapālas*\* – protect sentient beings.

Expanding upon the Buddha’s teaching that keeping the Five Precepts is the fundamental cause of rebirth in the human realm, Luang Por, returning to a favourite theme, said that it is only by keeping the precepts that we become truly human in this life:

If people lack sīla for a day, then for that day they are not fully human. If people are without sīla for a year, then for that year they are not fully human. Only when sīla is pure are people completely, fully human.

The Dhamma could only manifest when one’s life in the world was conducted within wise boundaries. Without sīla, people lacked the self-respect

\*Literally: ‘world protectors’. This term refers to the personal and social benefits to be derived from this wise sense of shame (*hiri*) and fear of wrongdoing (*ottappa*), without which morality would be left groundless and the world more vulnerable.

to apply themselves to Dhamma practice. Luang Por observed that they felt ashamed to meet with monks, afraid that listening to Dhamma talks would provide painful reminders of their shortcomings.

The Buddha taught that although *sīla* is an inner quality of restraint, it is nurtured by keeping precepts. The importance afforded to the precepts may be gauged by the fact that almost all Theravada Buddhist ceremonies begin with a formal request from the lay community to the senior monk present to ‘give’ them the refuges and Five Precepts. The monk does this by allowing his audience to repeat the refuges of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and then the precepts after him, one by one. The formula for ‘taking’ each precept does not involve making vows, but making a commitment to educate one’s conduct and speech in the form, ‘I undertake the training rule to refrain from ...’

For perhaps a majority of people in the Buddhist world, this short ceremony is rarely more than a ritual: most participants do not genuinely intend to keep all of the precepts after the ceremony has ended. For them, the Buddha’s teaching that virtue enhances merit-making has been received as a belief that the ceremony of requesting the precepts acts as a purification ritual preceding the offering of alms etc., and that it intensifies any good kamma created by the giving.

But for those with a genuine wish to live by the precepts, a formal request from a monk that they respect may constitute a renewal of their commitment to them. In the case that the ceremony is conducted by a monk like Luang Por Chah, the moral and spiritual authority of the monk may give the ceremony a particular binding power. Luang Por emphasized that the essence of *sīla* was the intention to refrain:

At the moment that you determine to keep the precepts, then *sīla* immediately arises. It is the intention that is the *sīla*. If you understand the matter in this way, then your wisdom will become wide-ranging.

On another occasion, he taught lay supporters three ways of keeping precepts:

In the first case, you ask for the precepts from a monk. In the second, you refrain by yourself: you know what all the precepts are and you make a determination to keep them. The third case is the absolute *sīla* of the Noble Ones. Here, the intention is to refrain once and for all: ‘Whatever is wrong action by body or speech, I will give up from this day forward.’ It’s a decisive *sīla*. The Noble Ones have this kind of *sīla*. Constant mindfulness protects their minds. They keep watch over themselves the whole time. These are the three paths by which *sīla* can arise. All three can be a foundation for Nibbāna ...

One of the first generation of lay supporters summarized how she understood Luang Por’s teachings on the precepts:

“Luang Por taught us to keep the Five Precepts. Even if, to begin with, they became sullied every now and again, he told us when that happened to try to make a fresh start.

“For the first precept, he told us not to take the life of living creatures or to cause them pain because doing so is evil and will have unpleasant results.

“The second precept means refraining from stealing or cheating. If anyone was to steal anything of ours, we would be filled with sorrow and regret. Because other people have the same feelings as us, we should not steal from them.

“The third precept means refraining from adultery, not being unfaithful. If this precept is broken, it leads to arguments and recriminations. Couples become suspicious and mistrustful of each other.

“The fourth precept is about lying and deceit. If you lie and cheat, it demeans you. Nobody wants to mix with you. Nobody respects anything you say, and nobody pays heed to your words.

“The fifth precept means refraining from drinking alcohol. Alcohol makes the mind reckless and heedless and forgetful of what is right and wrong. It can lead to every kind of evil action. When people are drunk, their demeanour is just like that of someone crazy; all signs of the manners and dignity of a well-brought up person disappear.”

Luang Por taught that without *sīla*, families would never know peace and harmony. There would be continual strife and turmoil. Keeping precepts was the indispensable foundation for a happy and nourishing family life as one of the monastery's lay supporters recalled:

"He taught us to be hard-working and to grow rice and plant vegetable gardens and fruit orchards, to grow chillies and aubergines and then sell our surplus in the market. From that we'd get the money to buy what we wanted. Fish wasn't expensive and we would be able to buy it in the market and so avoid going fishing – which not only took up a lot of time that we could be using for other work, but also made bad kamma. This was practical advice and made sense to us all."

Formerly, the local villagers would devote all of their land to rice cultivation. The poorness of the soil meant that they left it fallow for months at a time. Luang Por advised them to change their ways.

"We'd never known much about growing fruit or vegetables. But when Luang Por came to Wat Pah Pong, he taught us to grow vegetables, to plant orchards. He made us more awake to the possibilities. We became more hard-working and developed outer matters and inner qualities together. It was a big improvement. And it wasn't so difficult. Those who managed to keep the Five Precepts all the time were happy, without distress and found it very beneficial."

Enumerating the benefits of *sīla*, Luang Por would sometimes quote the (somewhat spurious) etymology in *The Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*). After stating that the word *sīla* and *sacca* (integrity) are synonymous, he said that '*sīla*' also means '*silā*', or 'stone'. Just as a stone thrown into water sinks down to the solid ground beneath it, *sīla* adds gravity to a person's demeanour. Its benefits also include a moral authority that permits fearlessness in public assemblies.

If you possess *sīla* – if you create no bad kamma through body, speech or mind – you can speak without misgivings, speak directly without fear, be courageous in acting and speaking in important matters. You're not in awe of anyone, not frightened by anyone. Moral people are fearless in their communities, and fearless at the time of death. When you've done nothing bad – or

if you have, and you've now abandoned that action and there are no grounds for remorse – the mind is at ease.

Keeping precepts is not an end in itself. It creates the conditions for the development of meditation practice.

When your actions and speech are impeccable, the mind cools down; and if you practise meditation, concentration arises easily. The mind is in a state of merit, in a wholesome state, because it has no concerns about past actions.

During the three-month monastic Rains Retreat, Luang Por would encourage the lay community to give special attention to their precepts. One elderly disciple remembered his advice well:

“He taught us to gather a number of small stones and develop a kind of *sīla* meditation. Whenever we got home from work, he said we should review our actions and if we’d broken a precept, to put a small stone on a pile. At the end of the Rains Retreat, we were to count how many stones there were in the pile, how many times we’d gone wrong. And then go and report to him.

“He said as householders we should all try to keep the Five Precepts purely. If we have *sīla*, then we feel cool and happy, our families are free of distress and commotion and we live in harmony and friendship with our neighbours as if they were our own flesh and blood. He told us to be truthful and moral, that if we kept the Five Precepts purely then [blameless] wealth would follow. If our *sīla* became broken or sullied or flawed, then our wealth would start to erode away.”

Some people were inspired by Luang Por’s discourses but soon became discouraged when trying to live by his advice. He told the story of a certain Chinese businessman who returned to the monastery a few days after formally requesting the three refuges and Five Precepts, looking distraught. After bowing three times, he blurted out:

“Luang Por, I’ve been ill for the past three days, ever since I received the refuges and the Five Precepts from you. My wife has been complaining; she keeps saying it was a bad idea. I don’t know how I’m going to make a living if the precepts make me ill like this. I’ve come to return them.”

An amused Luang Por replied:

Huh! I heard about this happening in the Buddha's time and I thought it was just a story. You can't give the precepts back to me. They don't belong to me. They belong to the Buddha. You'll have to send them back to him. Give it a bit more time.

The layman did not return. Some three years later, Luang Por met him and asked him if he'd got past his doubts about the precepts and the layman smiled proudly and said yes, he had, now he didn't waver whatever anyone said. Luang Por praised him:

Now you're a true human being.

#### NON-HARMING

The first of the Five Precepts embodies the central Buddhist moral imperative: Do no harm. It can seem puzzling to visitors to Thailand that so many Thai Buddhists appear uncommitted to this core Buddhist teaching of universal harmlessness. One reason put forward to explain the anomaly is that fishing and hunting played a vital role in Thai communities for thousands of years before the adoption of Buddhism. A diet based upon rice and fish survived the change of religious affiliation, and *ahimsā*, the ideal of harmlessness as a non-negotiable ideal, never really stuck. A common justification amongst Isan villagers has been that it is a good and noble thing not to kill, but only really practical for monastics and wealthy people who don't have to struggle for survival in a tough world. Others shake their head and blame their kamma.

Luang Por was familiar with the life of the villagers and understood their values and the way they thought. He acknowledged their concerns and did not make unrealistically high demands of them. He knew that if he were to do so, many would simply stop coming to the monastery, embarrassed at being unable to follow his advice. With regard to the first precept, he explained that whereas the killing or ordering the killing of living beings was a clear transgression of the precept, the act of buying fish in the market created no serious bad kamma.

This is not an unchallenged interpretation of the teaching in Buddhist communities. There is an argument that buying fish already killed increases the likelihood of the future killing of other fish, and is therefore unethical. The Buddha's statement in a sutta in the Numbered Discourses (AN 4.264) that the highest level of practice of the first precept includes 'not approving of or speaking in praise of killing', is quoted in support of this view. However, the purchase of meat was not considered by Luang Por Chah (or most Theravada teachers) to constitute a sufficiently strong link in the chain leading to the death of creatures for it to be kammically significant, and therefore unacceptable, for lay Buddhists. Luang Por continued a long tradition in taking the renunciation of killing or ordering the killing of creatures as a legitimate and workable standard for rural Buddhist communities.

While Luang Por did not promote vegetarianism, he also did not tone down his critique of the killing of living beings for food. When he visited Chithurst monastery in West Sussex, England for the first time in 1979, Luang Por was much taken by the sight of wild rabbits running around on the lawn behind the shrine room in the early morning. He remarked wryly that it was not a sight he would expect to see in Thailand. On his return to Wat Pah Pong, an account of the Chithurst rabbits – free and fearless, unharmed by the local villagers – joined his list of stock anecdotes. The teaching, often left implied, was that if a non-Buddhist, meat-eating country could refrain from hunting and eating wild animals, then why can't we Buddhists?

If that was back here, all that would be left of those rabbits by now would be the little pellets of dried dung.

Here, and on other such occasions, Luang Por would speak in ways aimed at stimulating *hiri*, the sense of wise shame, by pointing, often with humour, to the discrepancy between the professed values of his audience and their actual behaviour, and reminding them that it was in their power to change.

In public talks, Luang Por focused on the more egregious kinds of killing. It had long been a custom to slaughter animals to feed guests at big ceremonial occasions, whether a marriage, a funeral or even a temporary

ordination. Luang Por reminded people of the importance of this first precept:

If everyone kept this precept, the country would not be in such turmoil, the world would not be in so much a mess ... The Buddha forbade the taking of life right from ants and insects upwards, because if you're capable of killing ants and insects you're capable of killing rats and birds, ducks and chickens, cattle and buffaloes, horses and elephants. If you can kill horses and elephants, you have it within you to kill a human being, and in the end, you are capable of killing an arahant – there's that kind of progression. So the Buddha forbade killing altogether: you shouldn't kill anything, not even an ant or an insect ... In the end, wise people look for a way out of the world, to make as little bad kamma as possible until they can stop making it altogether.

Por Nudaeng was one who yielded to Luang Por's logic and gave up the taking of life.

"He taught us laypeople to refrain from taking life, to make our living in an honest way. But most laypeople would get stuck on this precept, including me. Because we lived in the countryside we all thought, 'If we don't take life, what are we going to eat?' In my mind, I wanted to argue the point. If all we took to offer to the monks every day to eat with their rice was chilli sauce, wouldn't all the monks leave the monastery? But Luang Por had the wisdom to be able to lead us out of our delusion. He gave the example of civil servants and the Chinese merchants. He said, 'They don't do any rice farming so how is it they eat rice every day? What about the utensils you use, the pots and plates and so on, do you know how to make those things yourselves? Can you make a spittoon? If you can't, then how is it that you possess those things? How did you get them? You have to find a way out with wisdom. If you don't take life, you have to use your intelligence to find another method. It's not always necessary to kill in order to eat meat. Wise people must find a skilful means of avoiding the creation of bad kamma. You must refrain from unwholesome actions of body, speech and mind because it will have unfortunate consequences.' I considered what he said and agreed with all of his reasoning."

*Por Am* was one disciple who had a sudden change of heart.

"I'd been fishing out at Kham Pond. My wife was sitting preparing food in the kitchen, and I was sorting out the fish. Suddenly, out of the blue, the thought arose in my mind, 'There's so many lives here. It's not in the tens of thousands, there's many hundreds of thousands of lives that I've taken out of that pond. And me, I'm just one life.' So I said to my wife: 'What do you think? All these creatures have to die just because of the two of us.' And she said: 'It's up to you. Whatever you say.' Two or three days later was Observance Day, and I went to the monastery to formally declare myself a lay follower. Luang Por asked me whether I could keep from taking life, and I said yes.

*Luang Por:* For how many years? For your whole life?

*Por Am:* No sir.

*Luang Por:* Why not? Well, how many years then?

*Por Am:* I'd like to ask for three years.

*Luang Por:* Why such a short time?

*Por Am:* If I suffer more than I do now, then I'll ask to be released from my vow. Or if everything stays the same, or if I'm not happy.

*Luang Por:* All right. If that's what you want. Look after the precept well. If you can't, then that'll be the end of it.

*Por Am:* After that, I gave up taking life. I planted sugar cane out in the middle of the forest. The strange thing was that I had a dog, and it liked to hunt the mouse deer and would bring them back in its mouth. I spent three years like that. And I ended up keeping the precept for the rest of my life.

The spirit, if not the letter, of the first precept extends to the mistreatment of animals. A man asked Luang Por what he thought about him keeping a dove in a cage.

I'd say letting the dove go would be the best thing to do. You've locked it up in a cage even though it's done nothing wrong. Try to imagine how it feels. Suppose somebody was to capture you,

put you in a cage, give you food and drink, clothes and a sleeping place and have you eat and excrete in that cage. Would you be happy? Would you like it? Would you thank your captor for it? Or how would you feel? You can probably imagine ...

Luang Por said that it was just as well other species of living beings did not know human languages:

They'd scold and curse us and try to rip us to pieces. Or else they would go on a protest march to some appeals court. It's like they've been framed and punished for something they didn't do.

## RIGHT SPEECH

The pathway between the brain and the tongue is so short that refraining from wrong speech is a major challenge, especially in busy and taxing environments. The fourth precept deals with refraining from deliberate falsehood, the most karmically harmful kind of wrong speech. But for Dhamma practitioners, this is only considered to be the bare minimum standard, or bottom line of restraint. Right Speech also requires the effort to abandon harsh and divisive speech, and most difficult of all, idle chatter and gossip.

Be careful of your speech. Speak true words, speak words that are of benefit to the listener. Don't speak roughly or use coarse words. Be mindful of what you are saying. Make your speech appropriate to the listener, so that when you've finished speaking both you and the listener are happy about what's been said.

## ALCOHOL

The fifth precept, requiring the renunciation of alcohol (and by extension all other addictive drugs that have similar effects on the mind's moral compass) is probably the least popular precept amongst lay Buddhists in Thailand. Luang Por once commented that some people feel possessive about their bad kamma and are afraid of being separated from it. He considered that people who drink alcohol or take drugs provide clear examples of a particular failure of intelligence: not wanting the results of

bad kamma, but continually creating the causes for it and neglecting the causes of goodness. On one occasion, he recalled trying to coax a heavy drinker into giving up drinking, and the man became as distraught as if he were being asked to abandon the thing dearest to him in the world. Luang Por remembered for once being at a loss for words, when the man moaned, ‘Oh no! Gods above! Just one more year! One more year!’

Despite the precept, alcohol consumption is endemic in Thai society. Luang Por recalled an encounter that took place on a night train:

Two men came stumbling towards me. One of them said, ‘Luang Por give me some Dhamma!’ I looked at them. Their eyes were muddy. I don’t know what they were intoxicated with, but here they were asking for the Dhamma. I said, ‘Don’t build your house yet. Level the land first.’ One was confused, ‘I don’t know what you mean.’ And I said to him, ‘If you get the opportunity, go to Wat Pah Pong ... It’ll be easy to listen to the Dhamma there. You’ll be able to listen to it well. Today the occasion and the surroundings and the audience aren’t conducive.’

Teaching the Dhamma to one unfit to hear it was a waste of time and effort.

It would be like filling a car up with petrol just in order for it to run about in circles – a complete waste of fuel.

The husband of one of the monastery’s lay supporters from Bahn Kor was a heavy drinker and made her life a difficult one. Finally, he died. After the cremation, the widow brought an earthenware jar containing his ashes to the wat, and requested that they be placed in one of the niches in the monastery wall designated for that purpose. With many of the dead man’s drinking buddies present, Luang Por said a few blunt words:

Not so long ago he was drinking and carousing, dancing back and forth and now he’s danced his way right into a jar. What’s the use of bringing dead bones to the wat? That’s no good at all. You should bring bones that can still dance. Then they’ll be able to listen to the Dhamma and understand it. What use are these

bones? Only cows and creatures that eat bones are interested in them.

Many people gave up alcohol through their faith in Luang Por. The drinking culture in the villages around Wat Pah Pong shrunk appreciably over the years. One of the grateful ex-drinkers summed up the feelings of many when he said:

“I used to really love drinking. I didn’t need a glass – I couldn’t get it down quick enough that way – I’d just swig from the bottle. It got so that two or three bottles wouldn’t affect me at all. I loved the stuff. If Luang Por hadn’t taught me to give it up, I’d probably be down in the gutter by now.”

Talking to people who had no background in Dhamma practice, Luang Por kept it simple. He explained that people addicted to alcohol created bad kamma. Under the influence of alcohol, people lost their sense of right and wrong, their ability to refrain from unwise action. Whatever pleasure they gained from drinking in the present was far outweighed by the suffering they would have to undergo in the future. As one local villager remembered, on this topic, Luang Por could be brutal:

“Luang Por said that I must try to give it up because it’s the path to ruin, to evil and suffering which would burn me up. It would lead me to disaster and a living hell. He said to me, ‘Have you ever seen someone drunk? They look disgusting, their speech is disgusting, they stagger and stumble around. You can’t talk to them. They’re like people that have lost their minds. They create a lot of bad kamma. In their next human life, they’ll be mentally defective ... If you don’t want to be like that, you should try to give it up.’ When I thought over what Luang Por said I started to feel afraid, and I gave up drinking.”

#### RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

Making a living in the world with honesty and integrity was given so much importance by the Buddha that he declared it one of the eight constituent elements of the path to liberation. Luang Por taught that those wishing to develop their Dhamma practice should seek to avoid work that involves harm to self and others and find work that, if not actively conducive to spiritual progress, then at least is not obstructive to it:

Those who know the Dhamma are not lazy. They are intelligent and hard-working. But their diligence in acting and speaking is accomplished with a mind that knows how to let go and is at peace. The Buddha taught that that is the way free from stress. It is Right Livelihood. It feels comfortable. Even if work is hard at times, it still feels comfortable because there is no fault in the work itself.

Some livelihoods were singled out by the Buddha as Wrong Livelihood: trading in weapons, trading in living beings, trading in meat, trading in intoxicants, and trading in poisons. On one occasion, a businessman who had sold many things in his time, including alcohol, had doubts about Right Livelihood and came to Wat Pah Pong to ask for some advice. Luang Por said:

Sell whatever you like, but don't sell alcohol. The kammic result will be an increase in your suffering and inner turmoil ... Sell other things. Even if you don't get rich, it's better to avoid selling things that are unethical. Remember: make your living in an honest, moral way and you will experience happiness and peace in your life.

On another occasion, he taught:

Don't imagine that simply by making a lot of money and amassing a lot of possessions that you'll be happy – that's a foolish idea. Whether it's a lot or a little, work towards those things but know moderation, know when it's enough. That feeling of 'enough' arises the moment that you stop craving for more.

As long as you still have craving in your mind there is never enough. It's like you give a dog some sticky rice, and it gobble down three lumps, but can't manage a fourth. Even so, when a chicken approaches to eat the leftover lump of rice, the dog growls at the chicken and threatens to bite it. Even though its stomach is full, the dog is still possessive of the lump of rice. Its heart is not full. No matter how much it eats, its heart is never full.

## IV. FIRST MEETINGS

One way of understanding Buddhist practice is to conceive of it as a long series of awakenings: some mundane, easily overlooked and only appreciated in retrospect, others more dramatic and memorable. Meeting Luang Por for the first time was the occasion for many awakenings of both kinds. Some people found the experience electric; for others, it signalled the beginning of gradual but inexorable changes in their values and way of life. Listening to Luang Por teach for the first time, a common perception was that his words seemed to articulate truths – far better than they could themselves – that on one level their hearts already sensed, but which they had never been able to make conscious.

The emotional effect of such revelations could be profound. Some people abandoned addictions or superstitions, began to keep precepts strictly, started to meditate. A certain number became monks and nuns. But not all were so ripe for radical change. In many cases, people were moved by Luang Por's presence, his charisma, the peace and compassion they sensed in him, but not so much as to take on board too much of the wisdom he shared. What stayed with them was the joy and uplift they'd felt at having been in the presence of such a monk, together with a strengthened faith in the Triple Gem. For these people, the immediate effect on their lives manifested as an increased commitment and pleasure in providing material support to the monastic order.

There were also those who went to pay respects to Luang Por and were unmoved by the experience. Occasionally, people departed the monastery feeling disappointed, angry or offended. Although Luang Por could be diplomatic when the situation called for it, he could also choose not to be, particularly if he saw fit to puncture a guest's self-importance and conceit. Often, his words or manner would shake the visitor's complacency and allow them to open to the teachings; occasionally, it did not work at all. The guest would quietly leave, pride bruised, and once safely out of the monastery, fume at how they'd been treated. Although Luang Por's ability to find a way to get through to people was remarkable, he was not infallible. Sometimes people's confusion or attachments erected barriers that were not to be breached. The Buddha once said that if a vessel is overturned, then even the sunlight cannot enter within it. Luang Por

himself was fond of the simile of the vessel full to the brim with water, allowing no space for more.

#### TA SOEI

Ta Soei was so inspired by his first encounter with Luang Por, that it led him to dismantle his simple wooden house and reassemble it on land close to the monastery.

“I first heard about Luang Por Chah from a monk I knew called Ajahn Tongcheua\*. One day he told me that there are different types of monks. There are monks who practise well and correctly and those that don’t. Monks of the second kind are not true fields of merit; if you associate with them, you gain no benefit. I asked him where I could find a monk of the first sort, and he said there was such a monk at Wat Pah Pong.

“Ajahn Tongcheua took me along the first time. We arrived at about three o’clock in the afternoon and spoke with Luang Por until almost seven in the evening. I completely forgot to get hungry. There were a lot of mosquitoes but I didn’t notice them. After the conversation was over, Luang Por gave a Dhamma talk that lasted until midnight. Then he told me to go and have a rest. But there was nowhere to lie down – the Dhamma Hall hadn’t been built yet – and so I sat and listened to Luang Por talk on through to dawn.

“Before Luang Por left on alms-round he told me to pick some edible leaves because the monks wouldn’t have much to eat with their rice. He was right. When the monks returned, all they had apart from rice were chillies and fermented fish, and so I pounded that all together, roasted the mixture in a pan and made a sauce. There were about six monks altogether and the same number of maechees. The chilli sauce was distributed evenly and we ate it with the rice and raw and boiled leaves.

“I stayed with Luang Por in the monastery for two days and then went home. I made a determination to go again. I don’t know how he was able to explain the Dhamma in such a way that I could understand it so clearly.

\* One of Luang Por’s former students.

From that day onwards, I gave up drinking alcohol and fishing and taking the life of even the smallest creatures.”

#### POR NUPEE

In an early Wat Pah Pong publication, a legendary dialogue is recreated. Written with a certain amount of poetic licence and apparently modelled upon dialogues between the Buddha and sceptical brahmans found in the Suttas, it relates how Por Nupee, one of Luang Por’s biggest critics, was tamed and converted into a loyal lay disciple.

Por Nupee was well-read – unusually so at that time – and known locally for his knowledge and acumen. He took pride in himself as a free thinker, and in the village was generally considered a little too fond of his own views and opinions. On occasions, he would go with family and friends to listen to Luang Por’s weekly Dhamma talk, but afterwards would always be critical of it to his friends. One day on a visit to the wat, Luang Por invited him to speak frankly about his criticisms and not worry about offending him. He wanted to know exactly what Por Nupee’s objections were.

Much later, Por Nupee was to admit that when Luang Por reassured him that he would not get angry whatever was said, he sensed an opportunity for which he had been waiting a long time. If, he reasoned, he spoke strongly and Luang Por listened quietly, he would enjoy getting things off his chest. If Luang Por showed signs of anger, he would admonish him, ‘What kind of meditation monk are you? You can’t even endure a few harsh words.’ And so he jumped straight in, accusing Luang Por of being deluded. All religions are conventions he declared; their teachings are stories for children, made up to control people. Merit and demerit don’t exist. Luang Por had fallen for this idea of kamma so completely that, out of fear of creating bad kamma, he was hiding away in the forest and tormenting his body for nothing, rather than living in the real world. If he wanted to be a monk, then why not live in the monastery in the village instead of in the middle of a forest? Better still, he should disrobe and enjoy life.

Luang Por sat through the whole tirade in silence, and then quietly repeated the Buddha’s analogy of people cut off from the truth of things

being like lotuses submerged beneath the mud. He asked a question: if Por Nupee did not believe in bad kamma, why didn't he take up armed robbery, or perhaps kill someone to see what it was like? Por Nupee snorted that he wasn't stupid: if he killed someone, their family would hunt him down, or he'd be thrown into prison. Luang Por commented that that was why it was called bad kamma.

On being challenged how he knew that all the effort he was putting into leading a virtuous life in the forest had any point to it, Luang Por chose to reply in terms his questioner might easily understand. Echoing the *Kālāma Sutta*, he said that given the stakes – torment in a hell realm for a very long time awaiting a wrong-doer if the law of kamma was true – assuming the law of kamma to be true was more intelligent than assuming it was not. Nothing significant was lost, and much stood to be gained.

Luang Por's practical, down-to-earth answers gradually began to dissolve Por Nupee's bluster. He finally admitted that he wasn't really so sure about this matter of kamma. In fact, he'd spent so much time thinking about it that he felt that his head was going to split open. When he asked for some guidance, Luang Por said:

The important thing to understand is that you have to sincerely abandon the bad and cultivate the good before you can know if merit and demerit really exist.

When Por Nupee asked Luang Por how he might do that, he was told that with such serious wrong views, it wouldn't be good to give him any teaching yet, as he would only distort it. Por Nupee had one more cutting rejoinder:

"Isn't the Buddha supposed to have more excellent knowledge and wisdom than anyone else in this world? He's the most sublime teacher, and you're his disciple. I'm the disciple of Māra.\* If you can't teach me, then you've got less wisdom than Māra."

Luang Por, presumably smiling at these words, replied:

\* See Glossary, 812.

*Luang Por:* If you're sincere about listening to the Dhamma, then pay attention and I'll give you a teaching to take away and reflect on and put to the test. Whether you believe it or not, try it out. You don't believe the teachings that you've heard from other monks, is that right?

*Por Nupee:* Yes, that's right. I don't believe anybody but myself.

*Luang Por:* Well, if you don't believe others, then you shouldn't believe yourself either. You're a carpenter. Have you never made a mistake sawing wood?

*Por Nupee:* Yes, I have.

*Luang Por:* Other matters are the same. Have you only ever thought and acted correctly? Have you never got things wrong, never acted incorrectly?

*Por Nupee:* I've made mistakes.

*Luang Por:* Well, if that's the case – if your mind is capable of leading you to think wrongly, speak wrongly and act wrongly – you can't believe it either.

*Por Nupee:* Then what should I do?

*Luang Por:* Don't think so much. And don't talk so much either.

The text does not elaborate if any further teachings followed these words. It does relate, however, that over the following days, Por Nupee couldn't put Luang Por's words out of his mind. He couldn't help himself, and the more he reflected on Luang Por's words the truer they seemed and the truer seemed the teachings of the Buddha. He could no longer find any arguments against them.

Por Nupee's conceit and pride started to wane. He abandoned his stubborn character and offered himself as a disciple of Luang Por. He kept the Five Precepts strictly, started to meditate and became a pillar of the monastery lay support.

It might be argued that many people came into Luang Por's presence for the first time with such a sense of awe and reverence, that they were fully primed to be emotionally affected by the experience, whatever Luang Por said and did. But there were also cases where people were quite unprepared for the strength of the feelings that he evoked in them. Mae Tiw was a local woman, a scientist with a Masters Degree in Biology from an American university. Meeting Luang Por was a pivotal moment in her life and the first step to her abandoning the world in favour of monastic training.

"When the three of us arrived at his kuti, Luang Por already had guests: there was a monk there with a group of his lay supporters from Bangkok paying their respects. The area underneath Luang Por's kuti was packed, and so we looked for a place to sit down on the outer edge of the concrete floor. Then something really strange happened: as soon as I began to bow, I felt as if I was being bathed in a stream of coolness emanating from Luang Por. I felt instantly refreshed right through my body and mind. It was like coming out of a hot muggy place and into an air-conditioned room. I stared at Luang Por and my thought at that moment was, 'So this is what they mean by mettā.'

"After a few moments, the group from Bangkok took their leave. Luang Por picked up a pile of small black and white photographs of himself and distributed them. He told his visitors that since they had taken the trouble to come such a long way to see him, and although he had no real gift to give them in return other than words of Dhamma, he did have these photos that a lay supporter had offered him – if anyone wanted one. Of course, everyone did.

"As soon as I saw Luang Por giving out photographs, desire immediately reared its head. I was worried that there would be none left, and so I spoke up from the back of the crowd: 'Luang Por, I'd like one as well!'

"Luang Por glanced over at me as he distributed the pictures – just for a split-second – but it made my heart drop down into my feet. I realized that I'd done something inappropriate, exposing my greed in such a coarse way. When all the Bangkok people had left Luang Por called out gruffly: 'Where

is she? The one who wanted a picture so much. Where is she?' He caught sight of me. 'Come and get one then.'

"I crawled towards him even though I found myself shaking with fear. I forced myself to glance up at his face. At the moment that I put out my hand to receive the photo, I saw that his complexion was incredibly warm and radiant. It was a face full of a genuine kindness and compassion for sentient beings. It showed no trace of the annoyance or irritation that I'd expected to see. My fear dissolved. From that moment until the time that we bowed and took our leave, my ears were ringing. I can't remember anything that Luang Por said to us. All I can remember is how blissful I felt."

#### POR BUAPAH

In Thailand, monasteries have always been the place that people can go to seek respite when their life goes wrong. Many people go to monasteries with a superstitious belief that a particular ceremony or offering to the Sangha will offset their bad fortune. But many who went to see Luang Por desired advice and wise reflections. He once joked:

Living here is like living in a garage. Anyone who has something wrong with them or with their children or with their wife or husband comes to give it to me to sort out – just like someone whose car has broken down pushes it into the garage and gives it to the mechanic.

The Buddha called separation from a loved one, a 'messenger of Dhamma'. In other words, the suffering caused by such separation wakes people up to the truths of life that they have formerly been able to ignore, but can do so no longer. One of Luang Por's most devoted lay disciples, Por Buapah, first made his way to Wat Pah Pong during a period of inconsolable grief.

"When I got back from the war, I married a girl from Nah Soom. We had a couple of kids and we were happy. Then the younger one died. My wife and I were overwhelmed with grief. I missed that child so much I couldn't eat or sleep. I was sad, but life went on. Now though, I felt as if I was just drifting along aimlessly. I couldn't shake off my depression. At that time, Luang Por had been at Wat Pah Pong for two or three years. A neighbour

of mine saw how much I was suffering and suggested that I go to see him. He said he might be able to help me get over it, and I went to pay respects to Luang Por and told him my story. He told me that everyone in the world has to die sooner or later. There isn't a single village, a single house, where there's never been a death. Even in monasteries, monks and novices die."

Luang Por told Por Buapah that he too must die, and perhaps in no long time. Given that his time in the world was limited, endlessly grieving and lamenting for the departed was helpful to no one. Wise people think of the uncertain time remaining to them and find renewed meaning in their life through devotion to goodness and virtue. It is probable that Por Buapah had heard similar words from well-wishers many times before and been untouched by them. But somehow, when they were spoken by Luang Por, it seemed to him that he heard them for the first time, and the truth of them struck him forcibly.

"He said that me and my wife should work together to do whatever was of true benefit to ourselves and others. We should establish ourselves in Right Livelihood, and steadily cultivate goodness and virtue as a supporting condition and provision for the future.

"As I listened to Luang Por's teaching, I found myself agreeing with everything he said. It was the turning point. And it made me enjoy listening to Dhamma. I started to nip off to see him more often. I learned many things, and my faith and respect in him grew and grew. Luang Por gave me jobs to do helping to clear paths, cutting grass. I felt very proud to be his trusted helper. My happiness returned."

#### POR AM

Some people were impressed by Luang Por's teachings but were too proud and stubborn to accept them without a fight. One such man was the herbalist, Por Am, who argued with Luang Por until he lost consciousness.

"Before I came to revere Luang Por, I argued with him for four days and nights. During the days, I was helping him plant a row of bamboos around the perimeter of the monastery. Night times, I'd carry on disputing with him right through to dawn. I'd say something like, 'If the rice is my rice

and the flour is my flour, how can it be bad kamma to make it into booze?" And he'd reply:"

You've got a knife, you can use the sharp side to kill and destroy or you can use it to prepare food. The knife is your knife, but if you bring the spine down onto the top of your head, how does it feel?

"So, anyway, we argued for four days and nights. On the fourth day at noon, I felt dizzy and I fainted. Luang Por came to see what was wrong. I said, 'I don't know, everything's gone dark, I can't see anything.' Luang Por took me by the hand and led me to the mango grove. Then he rang the bell. There were about six monks in the monastery at that time. He told them to bring a mat and pillow for me to lie on. Then he told them to put four water jars to the north of me and two to the south and fill them up to the brim. I don't know how long I lay there before I regained consciousness. When I tried to retrace my movements, the last thing I could remember was that I'd been at the Dhamma Hall, so what was I doing in the mango grove? I turned to the west, all confused, and then looked about me. At that moment, I heard Luang Por's voice calling me from behind my head, 'Por Am, Por Am.' I twisted my head back and saw him sitting cross-legged on a bamboo platform watching over me. He said:"

That's what happens when you contend with a monk teaching the Dhamma. You argued all night, you argued all day. Four days and four nights. It's not possible to defeat the Dhamma, you know, and that's why you fainted.

"I was starting to feel better – water vapour is a folk remedy for reviving people when they've fainted – and it was making me feel cool, comfortable and refreshed. When I look back now on what happened I see that I had it all wrong. Luang Por said that someone who lives in a high place is capable of seeing a person who is below him, but someone who lives in a low place can't see someone who is higher. I reflected on that. He was right."



## V. THE MANYFOLK

### FARMERS

The majority of Luang Por's lay disciples and daily visitors were peasant farmers. Speaking to a group of local people, he turned to a favourite theme: 'knowing what's what', not living blindly from day to day, but bearing in mind the guiding principles laid down by the Buddha:

So many Buddhists are still deluded and superstitious. From my reflections, I'd say that it's through not having grasped the main principles of Dhamma that they've gained no real ease in their lives. Just like people farming the soil without understanding about strains of rice or crop rotation, they don't know how to pick out what's of use to them and what's not.

Superstitions and unexamined beliefs were not confined to religious matters. The prejudice against education – the belief that it was a waste of time, that it unnecessarily deprived families of the labour of their younger members – provided a good example of a belief that seemed well-founded

at one time in the past and had now been thoroughly disproved. He urged his audience to reflect on how things that once had seemed like common sense and were agreed upon by all, could be so completely mistaken:

When I was a small boy, they built a school in the village and when officials came around registering all the children, some parents hid their children away. If children who did go to school failed an exam their parents would say, ‘Good! Now you can leave school, graze the buffaloes, and look after your younger brothers and sisters.’ And how are those children doing now? When they go into town, they can’t read the signs. In the market, they’re easily cheated.

Dealing well with the raw materials that life gives you, required a knowledge of guiding principles, like working with wood.

The old sages said that no matter how smooth you whittle a piece of wood, if you don’t get the right angles on it, it won’t look beautiful. Think about that – is it true? However smooth it might be, it doesn’t look beautiful. But if you get good angles on it, even if it’s not so smooth, it’s beautiful.

Without guiding principles, Luang Por said, ‘trying to make up a parcel, you tie yourself into it.’ Listening to the Dhamma helped one to reflect on right and wrong, good and evil, and to learn how to distinguish between them. But understanding the drawbacks of unwise actions and the benefits of wise action did not ensure protection from defilements. Indeed, some defilements were provoked by the very effort to do good. Luang Por said that this point would be understood by anyone who had ever planted lettuces:

You prepare the bed with a hoe and then you plant the seeds. You water them, put down some fertilizer and the lettuce grow beautifully. But there’s a problem: this same fertilizer doesn’t only promote the growth of lettuce, it promotes weeds as well. So what are you going to do? Are you going to pull up everything, weeds and lettuce as well? Or are you going to leave everything as it is. You can’t do either. If you want to have anything to eat, you have to pull out the weeds and leave the lettuce. That’s what

makes it hard work. You do good, but the bad comes bundled with it. You try to take out the badness but when you get down to it, you find that your desire for the good is accompanied by laziness. Desire and laziness come together. But if you believe in what your laziness is telling you, you'll never get around to doing good. So, you must try to go against your old habits and patiently withstand the defilements.

## TEACHERS

Luang Por put particular effort into teaching visiting groups of school teachers. He saw the importance to society of high standards in the teaching profession and was conscious of living through a period in which those standards seemed in decline. There were certainly some fine and dedicated teachers still to be found, and yet, in an increasingly materialistic society where the monetary rewards of a career had become the primary measure of its worth, the status of the school teacher was declining. Teaching had become less and less attractive as a career, and had become the fallback option for those who could not succeed in more lucrative pursuits. An increasing number of people were entering the teaching profession without any real passion for teaching. In the countryside, teachers were notorious for living beyond their means, and male teachers, in particular, were often given to heavy drinking and gambling.

Luang Por had a favourite opening question to visiting groups of teachers:

Oh, you're teachers. Do you only teach others or do you teach yourselves as well?

In Luang Por's view, teaching children was not restricted to passing on information, but included acting as a good role model to them:

Some teachers complained to me that the children were hard to teach and quarrelled a lot, and so I asked them whether the teachers all lived together in harmony. They didn't reply. So I told them it was understandable that the children quarrelled because they were still children and didn't know any better, but for the teachers to be quarrelling was unacceptable.

By the late 1960s, with the Vietnam War at its height, Western influence in Thailand was at an all-time high, and was often blamed for a decline in the levels of unquestioning deference that many authority figures considered was owed to them by their subordinates. This became a major issue in universities. When teachers asked Luang Por for advice on dealing with disrespect from their pupils, he would tell them that times had changed. Now teachers could no longer expect respect as their due; they had to earn it. The way to earn it was not just to say the right things, but to train themselves so that their students trusted and looked up to them. ‘If you can’t teach yourself,’ he said, ‘how can you teach others?’

Take the Buddha as your model. Once, at the end of a Dhamma talk, the Buddha asked Ven. Sāriputta a question in front of the whole monastic community. ‘Sāriputta,’ he said, ‘do you believe what I just taught?’ Ven. Sāriputta was wise. He raised his hands in *anjali* and replied, ‘Not yet, Lord.’ On hearing this answer, the Buddha praised him saying, ‘Good, Sāriputta. Wise people shouldn’t believe anything too easily. Whenever you hear something new, the first thing you should do is go away and reflect on it with wisdom. Only when you see that it is correct and well-reasoned, should you believe it. That is the way of the sages.’

See how skilful the Buddha was. If it was us these days and one of our students didn’t believe what we said, we’d probably lose our temper and chase them out of the classroom – that’s what usually happens. So, all of you, teach yourselves as well as others. Then you won’t suffer on account of your students.

Luang Por would often expand upon this theme of being a role model:

Be like the master mould that they use for Buddha amulets. Have any of you seen one? A single mould is enough for a great many amulets. Moulds are made with real expertise. The face, the eyebrows and the cheeks are hollowed out precisely, without distortions or indentations, in order to make beautiful Buddhas. All of you teachers are like moulds for your students. You must make yourself beautiful by cultivating the virtues of a teacher,

and by abiding at all times by the moral standards and correct behaviour appropriate to a leader.

If there was to be a return to a higher standard of morality in society, teachers would have to lead the way. They were closest to the children and had great influence over them.

Children are like vines. They have to climb up trees. If one tree is a few centimetres away and another is ten metres, which one do you think the vine will climb up?

Luang Por challenged teachers with a high standard. They needed to be constantly mindful of their behaviour.

Don't just teach them with words. Standing, walking, sitting, your speech – everything should be a teaching for them. Then the children will emulate you. They are quick-minded, quicker than adults.

Turn towards the moral teachings and take them as guiding principles. Be devoted to them. Don't get so intoxicated with material things that you just become devoted to having a good time. Fulfil your responsibilities as a leader and teacher just as the Lord Buddha did.

He illustrated his point with a *Jātaka* tale:

Once, a certain king possessed a thoroughbred horse. This horse was quick and nimble, intelligent and easy to train. One day a new groom came to look after it. The new groom had a deformed leg and walked with a limp. The horse saw him walking around every day and, being a quick learner, before long began walking in the same way. The horse thought that the way the groom walked was a teaching. Soon the horse had lost its graceful movement and went lame. A doctor was called in to treat the horse. He searched for splinters in the horse's hoof but could find nothing, and although he gave the horse medicine, it continued to walk with a limp. Then the Buddha-to-be came to look. He investigated the stable and the surroundings thoroughly and could see no cause for the horse's condition. Then when he saw the groom he

realized what had happened. He suggested that the king change the groom and find someone without a limp. The horse observed the replacement groom walking around, started to copy him, and before long it regained its beauty and grace.

#### SCIENTISTS AND ACADEMICS

One day, a certain scientist came to visit Luang Por. Speaking as someone who had practised meditation and felt qualified to make a comparison, he was of the opinion that as a means of realizing the truth of things, science offered a path that was more effective and more verifiable than Buddhist training. Luang Por was unimpressed. ‘Don’t you think it’s possible,’ he asked, ‘that you’re putting forth this claim without a full knowledge of the results of Buddhist training?’ He gave two similes: it was like a man putting one short arm down a hole who concludes that the hole only goes as far as his arm; it was like a short-sighted man who concludes that there are no such things as airplanes in the sky because he’s never seen one.

On other occasions, he spoke of the study of Buddhist teachings as being the keystone for the study of all other academic subjects, including science. Without Buddhist wisdom, study of any other subject might lead to as many drawbacks for human well-being as advantages. Supported by Buddhist wisdom, drawbacks would be minimized and advantages maximized.

At a time when education based on Western models was being promoted as the great panacea for Thai society, certificates and university degrees conferred great status. Luang Por would try to puncture an uncritical belief that book learning was in itself an invariably good thing:

Some people study so much that they become stupid, impossible to talk to. When they go up high, it’s too high; and when they come down low, it’s too low – they never see the Middle Way. Do you think that just because you’ve studied a lot that now you’re smart? Look closely: there’s such a thing as being too smart. Strong attachments to views and self-importance arise. You stop seeing other people as human beings. You think that you’re more powerful, better, more brilliant – and that way of

thinking inevitably leads to contempt for others. Thinking that you're superior to other people leads to nothing but trouble.

If you see a peasant farmer and see how you are no different from him; if you see an old person and think that one day you will be like that; if you see children in a state of confusion and you think that you used to be like that – if you bring things inwards and reflect on yourself in this way, then it's easy to understand the Dhamma.

A Thai proverb has it that if held in front of the eye, a single hair can conceal a mountain:

The teacher says that everything is impermanent, unsatisfactory and without self and you say you know, you know; but really, you don't have a clue. With that kind of knowing, you carry on living like a fool, and then you die.

Luang Por commented on the reasons he believed people who had high academic qualifications were often hard to teach. He said it was what happened when people studied to accumulate knowledge rather than to remove ignorance and defilement:

What they don't realize is that if they have a bachelor's degree, then so do their defilements; if they have a master's degree, then their defilements have got one too; and if they have a doctorate, their defilements do also.

He had a biting simile for people who have pursued academic studies to a high level but, having done nothing to educate their higher faculties, are still in thrall to their appetites:

They're like vultures that fly high in the sky but when they're hungry swoop down to gorge on a rotten corpse.

#### TROUBLED SPOUSES

The Maechee Section in Wat Pah Pong provided women experiencing serious marital problems with a refuge. When distressed women came to ask Luang Por's permission to stay in the monastery, it was common for

them to be so upset that they would pronounce themselves thoroughly disillusioned with life in the world and ready to become nuns. After some opportunity for a little quiet reflection, however, most would return home. Luang Por would sometimes joke at how such a professed determination to leave the world could disappear so quickly:

People ask why the guest house in the nuns' section is kept empty. It's kept like that for people who are disillusioned with the world to come and stay. The building was falling apart and I had it repaired for these women. Some are strongly disenchanted. But they don't stay long – one night and they're gone.

With women angry with their husbands, he was fatherly, advising them not to make important decisions in the heat of the moment that they might soon come to regret. He said it was better not to storm out of the house shouting, 'I'm never coming back, I'd rather die!' The pleasure that came from speaking in absolutes was not worth the embarrassment that would come when feelings had cooled down.

Don't say you're going for good. Don't say you're never coming back. Say you don't want to talk about whether you're going to come back or not, but for the present you want to go to the monastery and think things over and calm down ... Say you're going to stay at Wat Pah Pong with Luang Por for two or three days or so, because you feel unhappy. Just say that much for the time being. Don't go for the whole thing straight away. Don't say you want a divorce. Before long, you may well want to go back. Don't believe your mind.

#### THE ELDERLY

Elderly people, Luang Por said, had to learn like him, 'to be intelligent with regard to their stupidity'. As he passed sixty, he said, his memory started to play tricks on him. He would mean to call one novice over and the name of another would come out of his mouth. It was as if his brain was announcing very quietly that it was taking retirement. He had had to learn to allow for this. For laypeople, taking into account the limitations

and distortions of perception brought on by age was important if they were to avoid conflicts in the home.

You're their parents. You brought them up. You had to be really smart to do that, smarter than them. But that intelligence turns into its opposite. As you get older, that sense of being the one who knows what's right and wrong, of being more intelligent than your children, makes you stupid.

You argue with your children and you won't admit it when you're wrong, and everyone's emotions get stirred up. Your children are intelligent and sharp. They get fed up with you and walk away. When you're arguing with your grandchildren you're even more sure that you're right. You won't let them contradict you at all. In fact, they've got a point, but you've got to win the argument. That's not the Dhamma.

It was important for elderly people to face up to the decline in their faculties.

Are your eyes as good as they used to be? Are your ears? Is your body? Do you have as much energy as you used to? As good a memory? Is anything as good as it used to be? Why don't you look at that? ... Reflecting in this way is called being heedful, being alert to the way things are. Ignoring the truth of things is being heedless ... A heedless person is like a dead person, so don't be heedless.

Homes for the elderly did not exist at that time. One recourse for a family chafing under erratic and authoritarian elders, was to encourage those elders to devote themselves to good deeds in their old age and leave worldly affairs to the next generation. Grandad becoming a monk and Granma a nun was one acceptable way out of the problem.

In some cases, it's so bad the family can't take it anymore. The parents abuse their authority and don't allow the children to dispute anything they say. Sons, daughters-in-law, daughters, sons-in-law, they're intelligent, they start making suggestions, 'Mum, Dad, why don't you go and live in the monastery?' They try

to encourage you to go to the monastery, because they can't take your nagging anymore. They'll build you a kuti in the monastery. They'll pay for everything to make sure you're comfortable there. It's better than having you nagging them all the time at home. Let the monks teach you. Even then Granma and Grandad often don't get the message. But the family are determined to take you, to entrust you with the old monk at the monastery. It happens. Be careful.

It was Dhamma practice that could prevent relationships in the family from becoming riven with conflict. It started with giving up the fight to maintain a former state of affairs, and by humbly accepting the changes brought about by age.

Your urine smells worse than it used to, your excrement smells worse than it used to; everything smells worse. And you're becoming a child again, an old child. If you're meditating, you can solve these problems. You become easy to look after, you don't forget yourself, you're easy to talk to. You have mindfulness and alertness. You don't create bad kamma or enmity with yourself, your children or your grandchildren. That is what it means to cultivate the Dhamma.

## THE DYING

In speaking of the inescapable truths of life to the lay supporters that he had known for many years, Luang Por could be direct and challenging, making them chuckle at their own foibles. But as they approached death, his tone would soften. On one occasion, Luang Por was asked to record a cassette message for an elderly, well-practised lay disciple who was on her death bed. He gave a discourse (later transcribed and translated as *Our Real Home*) that became one of his best-known Dhamma talks and that has, over the years, provided comfort and inspiration to a great many people.

In the talk, Luang Por began by stressing the universal, inevitable nature of her coming death. Death was normal and natural and must be accepted.

You should understand that even the Buddha himself, with his great store of accumulated virtue, could not avoid physical death.

When he reached old age, he relinquished his body and let go of the heavy burden. Now you too must learn to be satisfied with the many years you've already depended upon your body. Accept that it's enough.

He said it was like a household utensil that starts off clean and shiny and, over the years, becomes chipped and cracked. It was an inevitable process.

The Buddha said that conditions, whether internal bodily conditions or external conditions, are not-self; their nature is to change. Thoroughly contemplate this truth.

However, the inevitable decay of the body did not have to affect the mind. By contemplating the true nature of things and abandoning attachments, the mind could free itself of this decline.

We must be able to be at peace with the body, whatever state it is in ... Now as your body begins to run down and wear out with age, don't resist that, but also don't let your mind deteriorate along with it. Keep the mind separate. Give energy to your mind by realizing the truth of the way things are. If your house is flooded or burnt to the ground – whatever the threat to it – let it affect only the house. If there is a flood, don't let it flood your mind. If there's a fire, don't let it burn your heart. Let it be merely the house, that which is outside of you, that is flooded or burned. Now is the time to allow the mind to let go of its attachments.

The Buddha said that what we can do is to contemplate the body and mind to see their impersonality, that neither of them is 'me' nor 'mine'. They have only a provisional reality. It's like this house, it's only nominally yours. You couldn't take it with you anywhere. The same applies to your wealth, your possessions and your family: they are yours only in name. They don't really belong to you. They belong to nature.

He taught her to examine her body to see how it was subject to change. He told her to look at the unattractive nature of the body and its lack of an abiding essence. There was nothing wrong with the body as such, he said. Our problems come through wrong thinking. Wanting the body not to die

was like wanting a duck to be a chicken, or wanting a river to reverse its course and flow towards its source.

Having once been young, your body has become old and is now meandering towards its death. Don't go wishing it were otherwise. It's not something you have the power to remedy. The Buddha told us to see the way things are and then let go of our clinging to them. Take this feeling of letting go as your refuge.

Meditation provided a refuge, and if well-developed, could provide some distance from the pain.

Keep meditating even if you feel tired and exhausted. Let your mind be with the breath. Take a few deep breaths and then establish the attention on the breath using the mantra 'Buddho'. Make this practice constant. The more exhausted you feel, the more subtle and focused your concentration must be, so that you can cope with any painful sensations that arise.

For an experienced meditator, great gains could be expected.

As the breath becomes increasingly subtle we keep following it, while at the same time awakening the mind. Eventually the breath disappears altogether, and all that remains is that feeling of alertness. This is called meeting the Buddha. We have that clear, wakeful awareness called 'Buddho', 'the one who knows', the awakened one, the radiant one. This is meeting and dwelling with the Buddha, with awareness and clarity. It was only the historical Buddha that passed away. The true Buddha, the Buddha that is clear radiant knowing, can still be experienced and attained today.

The task was to let go of everything that tied her to the world. He spoke at more length about accepting the naturalness of what was happening:

Just think: could you exhale without inhaling? Would it feel good? Could you just inhale? We want things to be permanent but they can't be, it's impossible. Once the breath has entered the body, it must leave. Having left, it returns. And that's natural,

isn't it? Having been born, we get old and then we die. It's completely natural and normal.

All she needed now was this Buddha-knowing. She had to let go of everything that tied her to the world. She had to relinquish her worries and concerns about her family. It wasn't that she should try to stop herself thinking about her loved ones, but she should think with wisdom, with an awareness of impermanence and the inevitability of separation from them. He explained the meaning of the word, 'world':

'The world' is whatever mental state is agitating you at the present moment. 'What are they going to do?' 'When I'm gone, who'll look after them?' 'How will they manage?' This is all just 'the world'. Even the mere arising of a thought fearing death or pain is 'the world'. Throw the world away! The world is the way it is. If you allow it to dominate you, your mind becomes obscure and can't see itself. So whatever appears in the mind just say, 'This isn't my business. It's impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self.'

Now she had inner work to do – work that nobody else could do for her, and even those who loved her the most could not help her with. She should focus herself on that work exclusively and leave the nursing of her body to others. Nothing around her was substantial. She needed to find her real home. Possessions, pleasures and pains, relationships, all that had made up her life so far, had provided only temporary shelter. Even her own body was now demonstrating that it was something she'd borrowed from nature, and would soon have to return. He began to speak in ways that encouraged *nibbidā*, the disenchantment with the endless cycle of becoming:

When you realize that's the way the world is, you'll feel that it's a wearisome place. You'll feel wearied and disenchanted. Being disenchanted doesn't mean you are averse; the mind is clear. It sees that there is nothing to be done to remedy this state of affairs, it's just the way the world is. Knowing in this way, you can let go of attachment; you can let go with a mind that is neither happy nor sad, but at peace with conditions through seeing, with

wisdom, their changing nature ... You see that if you have many possessions, you have to leave a lot behind; if you have a few, you leave few behind. Wealth is just wealth; long life is just long life. They're nothing special.

He exhorted her to let go of all that she still clung on to and go to her 'real home':

Let go. Let go until the mind reaches the peace that is free from advancing, free from retreating, and free from stopping still.

#### POR PUANG

It has been customary since the time of the Buddha for monks to visit laypeople as they lay on their deathbed, to help them leave this world for the next in the best possible way. In the last hours of his life, Por Puang, one of Luang Por's closest lay disciples, received such a visit.

Por Puang and his wife Mae Taeng were the first lay supporters of Wat Pah Pong to come from the local town of Warin. After spending a Rains Retreat as a monk, Por Puang asked to disrobe, saying that the monastery still lacked many necessities and he wanted to encourage other people from Warin to help him raise the necessary funds. Before long, he had arranged the purchase of a monastery bell, and sometime later he offered a large grandfather clock for the Dhamma Hall. His greatest joy was to come when he, his family and friends sponsored the casting of the brass Buddha statue that became the central feature of the Wat Pah Pong Dhamma Hall.

After he disrobed, Por Puang would still go to the wat every Observance Day, keep the Eight Precepts and listen to Dhamma. As his health declined in his later years, he offered to donate his skeleton to the monastery after his death as a *momento mori*, and asked Luang Por to pick up his body straight after his death and to prepare the skeleton in the monastery. At the beginning of 1963, when his doctors announced that there was nothing more they could do for him, Por Puang's family took him out of the hospital to spend the last days of his life at home.

On the twelfth of January, Por Puang's condition suddenly became much worse. He became unable to speak or open his eyes. He lay on his bed

groaning incessantly. His wife and children sat with him but were unable to relieve his pain.

On the thirteenth of January, Luang Por together with Ajahn Jun and a number of other monks were offered their daily meal in the local army camp. After the meal was over, Luang Por told Colonel Somboon, the commanding officer, that he wanted to visit Por Puang and asked if he could arrange a truck. The colonel said he would order a smaller more comfortable vehicle but Luang Por repeated that a truck would be fine. Por Noo, a lay attendant, asked him whether he was going to visit Por Puang or pick up his corpse. Luang Por said, 'pick up the corpse'. Por Noo was puzzled, 'How are you going to do that? He's still alive. Do you think his family will just give him to you? He said to pick his body up after he's dead, didn't he?' Luang Por was silent for a moment and then he said, 'Alive or dead, we're picking him up today' before turning to Ajahn Jun, 'Let's go. Por Puang is waiting.' It was 12.45 p.m. when they arrived at Por Puang's house and found him lying on his bed surrounded by his family. Luang Por sat down on the bed looking at the dying man for a few moments. Then he stroked his face gently, calling him:

Por Puang. Por Puang.

After some time, Por Puang opened his eyes and turned his head towards Luang Por.

Por Puang, do you know who I am?

Por Puang nodded his head and looked at Luang Por. While groaning sounds still came from his mouth, tears started to flow down his cheeks. Luang Por put his hand on the old man's forehead and started to speak to him in a gentle but firm voice:

Por Puang. You are a practitioner. You've been fighting this for a long time. When it's time for death to take your life, let it go. It belongs to death anyway; why are you so possessive of it? You've borrowed something and now you've got to return it. Keep the sound inside. Why are you letting it out?

As Luang Por finished speaking, Por Puang's groaning immediately ceased. Luang Por continued:

The body is impermanent and unreliable. It's not beautiful; it's old, you've used it for a long time. Go and look for a new body in that place that you saw in your vision when you were a monk.

All this time Luang Por was stroking Por Puang's face. He turned to Colonel Somboon:

*Luang Por:* What time is it?

*Colonel Somboon:* 12.55, sir.

*Luang Por:* Another five minutes and he'll be gone.

Luang Por kept stroking Por Puang's face. At exactly 1.00 p.m., the dying man's eyes drooped and closed. Por Puang had died at peace.

#### KILLING THE DEFILEMENTS OF TA SOEI

After Luang Por became abbot of Wat Pah Pong, he did not completely abandon the practice of tudong. In the early years, in particular, when he was still in good health and there were few monks in the monastery, every now and again he would simply walk out of Wat Pah Pong and into the countryside. Usually he would take monks with him, occasionally laymen. One of the laymen who accompanied him on such journeys later became a monk, and one of the best-loved and colourful characters in the Sangha. Ta Soei, quoted above describing his first meeting with Luang Por, had been a larger-than-life figure in the local community before meeting Luang Por, his dissolute and criminal lifestyle earning him the title of '*nak leng*'\*. His greed was legendary, and in his old age he had many stories to tell about how Luang Por had set about taming the coarse fellow he had once been.

"He took us on tudong out to Buntarik. There were half a dozen of us to start with but two ran away on the first night. As the days wore on, more and more ran away until in the end there was only me left. I was homesick. He said he'd take me for a year, and the more I wanted to go back the further he'd take me. I just gave in and took what came. Wherever we

\*This word '*nak leng*' is difficult to translate. It lies on the spectrum between 'rascal' and 'villain'. Ta Soei was nearer the rascal end of the spectrum.

went I'd always have my eyes out for *samors*. One night he made me sleep by a bamboo clump even though it was obviously the local toilet place and stunk of excrement. As the dew fell the smell got even worse. When I complained, he scolded me:"

Don't make such a fuss. There's more crap in your intestines than there is out there.

"We reached Khu Muang and I came across a beautiful samor tree. He told me to climb up and shake the branches. The samors cascaded down. I made a bundle for them in my *khaoma* cloth. So now I had to carry Luang Por's bowl and the samors and his shoulder bag which was also heavy. Luang Por didn't carry anything at all. As we walked along I wanted to throw some of the samors away, but then we came to another tree, even more bountiful than the last one and Luang Por had me collect another great pile. I thought that he would help me to carry something, but he refused. I tasted a few of the samors from the first tree, a few from the second tree, and diarrhoea came on in a big way. My bags were too bulky and heavy to put down in time. Luang Por had to teach me the field method:"

There's no need to sit down. Stand and grasp hold of a tree. Crap like a water buffalo. You can do that, can't you?

"So I stood and defecated until my bowels were empty ... Ten o'clock at night and we were still walking. He wouldn't rest. We reached a stream and he crossed it on a dead tree. I couldn't manage that and waded through the stream. The water was deep, my baggage was heavy and I couldn't get up the other bank. Luang Por had to climb down and drag me up. It was midnight before he would stop walking, and I was completely soaked. 'This is so much suffering!' I groaned."

You've come on this trip to see suffering so that you can go beyond it.

"Luang Por said this as if it would be some kind of comfort to me."

It's through seeing suffering that you become wise.

“I was exhausted. As he spoke I started to drift off to sleep, and so he scolded me again:”

I’m giving you a teaching and you fall asleep.

“But as I lay there, I noticed he was using my khaoma cloth to drive the mosquitos away from my body. I slept for a long time. Whenever I opened my eyes he was still sitting there. I couldn’t help asking him, ‘Luang Por, aren’t you tired? You haven’t lain down at all.’ He responded:”

The more tired I am, the better the meditation.

“And then he had another go at me.”

People without a thought in their heads are only interested in lying about. Even when you set them an example they don’t take it.

“Oh, come on! I’m tired!” I couldn’t stop myself arguing with him. Finally, I asked him if we could go back.”

Alright. If that’s what you want.

“He must have seen that I really was far gone.”

The next morning Luang Por and Ta Soei took the road back to the monastery.

“A car passed. In those days, there weren’t any proper roads; cars had to go along the buffalo tracks. When he saw us, the driver stopped and ran over to invite us to go with him. Luang Por gave a grunt of assent. I prepared to get into the car. But no. The driver came over to repeat his invitation. Luang Por gave another grunt, but he made no move to get into the car and it drove off without us. When I started grumbling, Luang Por turned on me.”

Have you come to ride in cars or walk on tudong?

“Couldn’t we have at least given them the bag of samors?”

And how do we know where he’s going?

“By now I was getting angry. The car was moving farther and farther away. I said, ‘Luang Por, are you trying to kill me or what?’ Luang Por replied quick as a flash:”

Of course, I’ve brought you with me to kill your defilements. Everything that comes out of your mouth is defilement. If you don’t come and do something like this, then how will you ever be free from defilements? Try lying around doing nothing and see if you get liberated. All that’ll happen will be that suffering will overwhelm you. Suffering has to be known before you can go beyond it and realize happiness. I’ve brought you to make merit, to look for merit. Do you see that or not? Merit and defilement both lie within us. Cravings never come to an end. You make ten baht and you want a hundred. You get a hundred and you want a thousand. Now look: your craving has stopped because you feel nothing but physical tiredness, you don’t want anything at all. If you did get anything, what would you do with it? Don’t you realize that you’re going to die? Each day, try to think of death. You’re going to die. You know that, don’t you?

“Luang Por went on like this at great length before turning around to question me further:”

Do rich people die? Do poor people die?

“‘Yes, they all die.’ I answered irritably.”

Well then, don’t you think you’re going to die? ... The poor die and so do the rich. You have to be liberated before you can be happy. So what’s to be done?

“He ended up asking me a question as usual. ‘Become a monk’ I said, thinking it was a pretty intelligent answer.”

If you become a monk, will you be free of suffering if you don’t practise? Kamma means action. We do good, and we do evil. If we do good, then we get good results. If we do evil, then we get evil results. So what’s there to do except do good. And that’s what you’re doing. I’ve brought you to do good, because passing through trials and tribulations will lead you beyond suffering.

“That afternoon we came to a village and stopped for a rest in one of the adjoining fields. There were people around grazing their cattle and when they came over, Luang Por called out to me:”

Get some soft drinks. Bring over three or four packs.

“I got angry. I wanted to keep the money, and he was having me buy drinks for buffalo herders. In the end they couldn’t finish it all, and he told them to take the remainder home with them. When we got back to the wat he asked me:”

How much money is left? We need bricks and cement.

“I said, ‘It would have been a better idea to keep the whole lot for bricks and cement instead of spending it on soft drinks.’ ”

No, that would have been a bad idea, because we wouldn’t have practised giving, and the buffalo grazers wouldn’t have had their drink. They were tired, and they must have been thirsty. When you drank some, you were refreshed weren’t you?

“‘Yes.’ I replied sheepishly.”

Well then ...

“He said and started off on another sermon:”

When we make others happy it makes us happy. When you’ve received that kind of happiness, then what more do you want? ... You have to raise your mind up high. When the floods come, only the houses built on higher land stay dry. If you indulge in low, coarse things, then your mind becomes baser, and whatever you do you’ll never see the Dhamma.

## VI. FAMILY LIFE

The first time householders listened to Luang Por give a Dhamma talk or went to ask him for advice, they were usually surprised at the accuracy and penetration of his insights into family life. It seemed common sense to most people that the causes and conditions underlying family conflicts

were specific to householders, and impenetrable to a monk who had never married or had the experience of raising a family himself. But leading a large community over a period of many years allowed Luang Por to accumulate a great deal of understanding of the problems that can arise in human relationships. The kind of conflicts that arose in a monastery were not as far removed from those in a family as might be expected. Moreover, the wisdom that arises from cultivation of the Eightfold Path had given Luang Por a comprehensive knowledge of causality in its many modes, including an understanding of the relationships between mental states and behaviour – both destructive and constructive. On one occasion, a visitor was bemoaning her lot and told Luang Por how lucky he was not to have a family, with all of the tangled problems that it entailed. He replied:

I do have a family here in the monastery, and it's a big one.

Listening to laypeople, monks and nuns unburdening themselves to him over the years was another rich source of material to reflect upon.

Living at Wat Pah Pong is, for me, like being a dustbin. People come and throw their problems at me all the time. This person comes to complain and then that one – it's given me a lot of wisdom.

His principle in teaching householders was a simple one:

I teach them in the same way that I always teach myself.

## MARRIAGE

In a Buddhist culture, a marriage ceremony involves no religious rituals. It is considered to be a wholly secular affair, in which two people formalize their commitment to each other in the eyes of their family and friends and the state. The bride and groom receive blessings from the elders of both families and sign an official register. Although the presence of the Sangha is not required for the validation of the marriage, it is common on the morning of the wedding for a group of monks to be invited to chant verses of blessing and to receive alms. If the senior monk is the teacher of one of the newly united families, then he may be invited to give some words of advice to the newly married couple. On one such occasion, Luang Por

travelled up to a small village which had supported him and his disciples in the period before he established Wat Pah Pong, to bless the wedding of the daughter of an old lay supporter. The house was packed with people who had known him for a long time.

Luang Por gave advice to many newly married couples over the years. In Thailand, a favourite theme for such talks are the four householder virtues\* (honesty, self-improvement, patience and generosity), as a foundation for a long, happy life together. Luang Por occasionally spoke about these qualities, but on this particular day he adopted a more cautionary note: married life was no bed of roses and couples need to be prepared to work hard on themselves and the marriage to make it work. Dhamma was the only thing that would give them the ability to deal well with the challenges ahead and make their life together ‘auspicious’. His talk was clearly not meant for the young couple alone, but for all the people gathered together to hear him speak.

As he often did when addressing people who had known him for many years, Luang Por taught in a direct, plain-spoken manner, his voice, nevertheless, imbued with an obvious warmth and good humour. He began by telling the couple that the ceremony itself wasn’t particularly important; it was how they conducted themselves afterwards that really mattered (an echo of the words he would use to newly ordained monks). An occasion did not become auspicious because of the ceremonies performed; and if animals were killed for a wedding feast then, on the contrary, the occasion would be extremely inauspicious. Auspiciousness was, in fact, a synonym of goodness and virtue. The couple’s lives would be auspicious if they made efforts to live them in such a way that they grew in goodness, and if they were able to instil goodness in their future children and grandchildren.

Luang Por went on to instruct the couple about the meaning of the word ‘*khrop khrua*’, the Thai word for ‘family’. He said that the reason why the married life of the Buddha’s great female lay disciple Visākhā had been so free of problems was because she had no unrealistic expectations, having received explanations about the reality of family life from a monk before

\*SN 10.12

her marriage. Now, Luang Por was following in this tradition. His explanation of ‘khrop khrua’ involved an etymology that was entirely original to him, and provided an exposition of family life that, at first glance, seems overly grim. But it is difficult to overestimate the importance of context to understanding the tone and import of oral teachings. Here, Luang Por was visiting old lay disciples, and his clever play on words (this is a culture that loves wordplay) would have delighted his listeners, tempering the directness of his words. Luang Por may be imagined to have a gleam in his eye, the audience (with the possible exception of the bride and groom) to have big smiles on their faces and for there to be numerous meaningful glances and nudges amongst them as he speaks:

You still don’t really understand the meaning of this word ‘khrop khrua’ (family). First of all, ‘khrop’ – okay, listen to this carefully: you’re breathing comfortably, moving around at your ease, and then you get hold of something and box yourself inside it (khrop). Can you handle that? ‘Khrua’ means that after you’ve been closed in there, you’re cut open with a knife and gutted (khrua\*), and you can’t escape. That’s the etymology of the word ‘khrop khrua’. In other words, it means now you’re going to be assailed by all kinds of problems. That’s why I’ve come to give you some advice on how to deal with all this complexity in your lives and cut off the problems. Now you have a khrop khrua, you’re living in a confined space; your livelihood and finding the money to raise a family is more important than anything else. The ceremonies today are superficial. What is important is to create some understanding.

He taught that it was important for family members to try to understand each other’s point of view. They should learn how to be good listeners, easy to talk to, skilful in speaking in ways that did not inflame disagreements. They should not talk about private family matters with other people or bring disruptive issues from elsewhere into the family home. In words first taught to the great laywoman Visākhā, they should not take fire from within the house outdoors, or fire from outdoors into the house:

\*The Isan pronunciation of the Thai word ‘khrua’ is ‘khua’, meaning ‘to eviscerate’.

Some places I've been to, family members don't understand each other at all: the husband and the wife, the father-in-law and the son-in-law, the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law – they all keep arguing away and then have to drag each other off to the village headman's house to have him help to adjudicate. Having to rely on the village headman is like somebody being out in the hot sun and not knowing how to get into the shade by themselves, or being thirsty and not knowing how to put water into their own mouth. That's pathetic. I've seen this in one village where the headman was at the limits of his endurance with people going over the same old matter, again and again, with no end to it. People should know how to solve their own problems. In family matters – disagreements with your parents or your children or your grandchildren – you should know how to make decisions and resolve conflicts by yourselves. Patiently talk things through.

You've all been children. You know it's difficult for children to understand their parents ... You think you're teaching your children but they think you're telling them off or nagging them. So, each side goes off on their own track and you don't get on any more ... As parents, it's easier because you were once a son or daughter living with parents, and so you've seen both sides. An adult can understand a child, but a child can't fully understand an adult. That's why it's difficult to talk to each other.

But no matter the difficulties, the ups and downs of emotion, you're still able to live together. How? The virtue of respect. Even if your parents complain and nag, they're still your parents and you respect them for that reason. No matter how angry you are with them, you could never kill your mother or father. If they weren't your parents, you might have by now! ... We get by because of mutual respect.

Parents and children in conflict with each other were to learn how to step back from their feelings of hurt and frustration and reflect on the big picture of their relationship. Each had to learn how to release their attachment to resentments and fixed views.

Don't give in to your emotions. When your children don't listen to what you tell them, then remember that you were their age once; as they get older, they will gradually understand. Sons and daughters should bring to mind how their parents have brought them up and cared for them. That's how it's done: both sides letting go. Things settle down, you start to feel more comfortable, and the tensions are released.

It was mutual respect that provided the glue that held a family together through its ups and downs.

'*Gāravo ca nivāto ca*'. If there is mutual respect amongst all the members of a family – between grandparents, parents and children – then even if there are misunderstandings you can get by. Because respect is Dhamma. It is a principle that binds people together and prevents them from breaking apart.

His message was that married life is one of shared struggles, of sacrifices. By practice of the Dhamma, couples could prepare themselves for coming challenges. They could make something good and auspicious out of their life together.

Getting married, inviting your teacher to instruct you is the beginning of the establishment of your life together. Before, you were a son and a daughter, and now you're taking the first steps towards becoming a mother and father. Being someone's child isn't difficult. When the roof leaks, it doesn't leak on the children, it leaks on the parents. When there's no money, the shortages don't reach the children; it's the parents that go without. So make your married life a good one, make it auspicious.

Finally, as the accompanying monks chanted auspicious *Jayanto* protection verses, Luang Por sprinkled lustral water over the bowed heads of his audience.

\*'Respect and humility'; A quote from the *Maingala Sutta* (Khp 5; Sn 2.5) which lists 38 qualities that create auspiciousness in the human heart.

## NOT BREAKING THE POT

Luang Por's talks often contained a current 'Dhamma riff'. This was a teaching that might be based on a simile or a pun or a passage from the Suttas. For a month or two, this riff would pop up in his Dhamma talks on a regular basis until one day it disappeared without trace. The term 'khrop khrua', featured above, formed the basis for one such riff on the pitfalls of the household life. On one occasion, he spoke of how small differences overlooked at the beginning of a marriage can fester over many years and leave elderly married couples with little in common:

Keep a close eye out for this. The stronger the love, the stronger the negative emotion. To begin with, married life is not so bad, but by the time you're fifty or sixty you can find that your words hardly make any impression on the other one. The old woman says something over here and the old man sits listening way over there. By now he wants to rig up a curtain between them. Why is that? Because of 'khrop khrua'. They don't know how to get through to each other.

A child in the family is a source of joy, and yet, at the same time it can be hard and stressful work for the parents.

When a baby's born the parents have to take responsibility for it. The baby has no idea of the burden it's placing on its parents. It wants to crap and so it does, without any thought for the parents. It wants to run around, and you have to follow along behind it cleaning up and making sure it's all right.

Love was not enough. Without cultivation of the ability to reflect wisely on experience, raising children could easily turn sour. He sketched one scenario:

As children grow so does your love for them. Meanwhile, they become even more exuberant and naughty and even more disobedient towards their parents. The child just goes its own way, and the two old grandparents that live with you start complaining. It's all so troublesome, there's always some kind of

disturbance. Some of you who are sitting here listening today have probably experienced this.

There was no one fixed way to raise children.

Some people teach just a little, and the child turns out well. Some people teach a lot, and their child takes no notice. Then the parents have to harden their heart and be stern.

Luang Por said that parents should take the Buddha's advice that, in any task, including raising children, they should consider themselves like a potter shaping pots. Their job is to keep their attention on making the best pot they can, given the raw materials at hand and their own skills. They need wisdom to focus on doing their job as parents, in such a way as neither they nor their children suffer in the process. If they are sure that sometimes being stern is the best thing for the child, then so be it. The important thing is not to dwell on it in the wrong way and create suffering. It is not that parents are forbidden from having strong emotions while raising a child but emotions need to be understood for what they are.

The ideal was to solve family problems in the way prescribed by the Thai proverb in which the fish is caught and eaten with the lotus still unbruised and the water unmuddied. But unfortunately, he said, what often happens is that the lotus is bruised, the water muddied, and all the fish die in the water.

But 'khrop khrua' – these feelings of confinement and of being skewered by problems – were just part of life. He turned again to his own monastic family:

I try and shape the clay into pots and not to let the pots break. I teach people how not to suffer and don't let myself suffer either. I teach them and teach myself at the same time continuously. Some people only teach others. They're like the housewife washing the dishes. She sees they're dirty and so she cleans them, but her mind is clouded. She is scowling and grumbling away to herself. She's scrubbing the dishes clean, but her heart is dirty. She's not looking at her mind. It's really saddening how she gets the dishes clean and makes her mind dirty at the same

time. Is that what you want? Watch out! Sometimes you grab a broom and start sweeping the house. The children have left a mess. They're completely mindless. You grumble and grumble as you sweep. You sweep the house clean but you don't sweep your heart, and you're suffering the whole time.

## WORRY

On one occasion, a woman came to see Luang Por full of anxiety for her son.

“My children have no ambition. They have no drive to make anything of themselves. I’m afraid that they’re not going to survive in the world. Luang Por, tell me what to do.”

I’d say that you’ve got the wrong idea as well. It’s like mice living in a hole. When their children are small, the parents search for food for them. But when their children are grown, do they still do that? Do they still dig holes for their children? No, that’s not what happens. The young mice go and dig their own holes. Your children are the way they are. From what I’ve seen, some people, after their parents’ deaths, become richer than their parents ever were. That also happens, and my advice is that you should think more generously of your children, and then you will be at ease. You love your children. When they’re successful, you take their success as your own. When they do something bad, your mind dwells on their badness. You can’t dig it out, you can’t loosen its grip. And so, you don’t get anywhere.

## BEREAVEMENT

Luang Por stressed that it was important to face up to the fragility of life and the inevitability of separation. The worst nightmare of a parent is the loss of a son or daughter. The untrained mind shies away from the very thought; as if by accepting the possibility that such a terrible thing might happen, it somehow makes it more likely that it will, in fact, occur. Luang Por maintained that it was wiser to prepare for any eventuality:

It's as if a snake slithers into the room while you're sitting there with your eyes closed. As long as you don't see it you're unafraid. But the moment that you catch sight of it, then you become terrified. You jump up and rush out ... It's like when there is nothing but love, without wisdom ... if you've never used your wisdom to reflect on that love, and the one you love dies, then you feel the loss as if 90% of yourself had died with him. It's a catastrophe; you don't know how to deal with it.

Meditation and regular contemplation on the nature of change was a preparation for whatever life had to throw at you.

It's as if you see the cobra slither in. Although it's poisonous, you are prepared and you may not even feel afraid. Perhaps you shoo it away or simply get out of its way. Despite its poison, it can't bite you; and if you're not bitten, then you don't get poisoned.

On one occasion, he spoke to a woman who had lost her teenaged son some time before and was still unable to let go of the grief. As she was a meditator, he went beyond words of comfort. At one point, he said:

You must understand that he was truly your son, but only on a conventional level. This particular lifetime he took birth with you. The good and the bad things he did were his own. The length or brevity of his life was his own kammic inheritance. Through the processes of becoming and birth, you simply gave him the opportunity to be born. If you look at it in that way, then you can be at ease in your mind.

The time was now ripe to let go and see her grief through the eyes of a Dhamma practitioner. Her suffering now was through attachment to the conditioned perception of 'son'. Her challenge was to recognize that every thought of her lost child was a conditioned and impermanent event that arose and passed away in her mind and did not belong to her. The question was whether she was willing to let go.

## CUTTING THE PIE

A wealthy female lay supporter once recounted the advice Luang Por gave her concerning her possessions:

“I used to think I’d divide my wealth – my fields and orchards – amongst my children. I didn’t think much about it beyond that. I just thought I’d distribute what I had and then in my old age rely on my children to look after me. That was the plan in my head, but Luang Por must have known because he warned me about it.”

If you’re thinking about dividing your wealth amongst your children, you should first consider it carefully. It might not be such a good idea to give everything away. It might happen that your children don’t recognize the debt of gratitude they owe to you as their parent, abandon you and refuse to take responsibility. Then, when you’re old, you won’t have anyone to rely on. When you make the division, put one part aside for yourself. As long as your children and grandchildren know that you still have one part of your fortune left, they will look after you. Otherwise, you might end up like a rotten log that has no mushrooms growing on it and nobody paying it any attention.

“I reflected on Luang Por’s advice and followed it. He was right in everything he said. He must have known in advance what would happen. It increased my respect and faith in him, and I tried to follow what he taught me: to accumulate goodness by keeping the precepts and cultivating my mind.”

## VII. DHAMMA PRACTICE

We’re like a chicken, that’s all. The chicken’s born, has chicks and spends its day scratching around in the dirt. And then in the evening, it goes to sleep. In the morning, it jumps down to the ground and starts scratching around again, ‘guk, guk, guk’. And then in the evening, it goes to sleep again. Is there any point to it? No.

We're like chickens, like creatures with no wisdom. The owner comes every day with food. He takes hold of the chicken and lifts it up in his arms to look at it. The chicken thinks the owner's being affectionate. As for the owner, he's thinking, 'Hmm. It's getting heavy, how much does it weigh? Is it up to two or three kilos yet?' The chicken doesn't know what's going on. The owner brings it rice to eat, and it's happy; it thinks the owner loves it. It eats it all up, gets fat and thinks it's got it made. But as soon as the chicken weighs two or three kilos, 'That's it! Off to the market.'

That's how most people lead their lives; they don't see the danger. They're deluded, just like the chicken. The owner takes the chicken off to the market. It's in the back of the truck, and it's still clucking '*Ohk, ohk!*', having a great time. Then the car reaches the market, and the owner sells the chicken to a Chinese stall owner. The chicken still doesn't suspect anything. The Chinese guy tears the feathers off its neck, and the chicken thinks the guy is grooming it. The chicken is that stupid. It's only when the knife has cut its throat that the chicken realizes, 'Oh, I'm dead.' We don't see our own life. We don't know how to remedy our defilements.

From the moment that he established Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por began teaching his lay disciples that their responsibilities weren't confined to offering food to the Sangha and making merit. Dhamma isn't something far away, he'd say, it's not something belonging to the monks. Dhamma is the truth of all living things and the freedom from suffering is possible for anybody – monastic or lay – who cultivates the Eightfold Path.

Everyone – monastics and lay Buddhists – have an equal opportunity to practise Dhamma and to reflect on it. And the Dhamma which monastics and lay meditators reflect on is the same Dhamma and leads to the same peace by the same means.

Practising Dhamma was the way to make the best possible use of a human birth that was rare and precious. He said that procrastinating about the effort to cultivate one's mind and then lamenting about it when you

were already old and approaching death was like being an incompetent gardener:

You plant beans, melons, pumpkins, green beans and so on. Once they grow up, they mature, and then they go rotten. Knowing that, you pick them before that happens, don't you? If you want to cook and eat them or sell or barter them so that you derive some benefit from them, then do it in a timely way. What's the use of sitting around lamenting when they have gone rotten?

On her retirement, Upāsikā Ranjuan, a highly regarded author and civil servant, left the lay life and went to live in the nuns' community at Wat Pah Pong.\* Later, she went on to become a widely respected Dhamma teacher. Her life changed direction after listening to the teachings of Luang Por.

"Like most Buddhists, I'd make merit, listen to Dhamma talks, put food in the monks' bowls, take the precepts and all those kind of things, and I thought that was enough. I never considered that anything more was required to be a true Buddhist. Then I heard Luang Por give a Dhamma talk for the first time, and I realized that the most important thing that a Buddhist should do is to train his or her mind, and that to do so would be fulfilling the deepest wish of the Buddha."

For most of the villagers who came to the monastery every week, their basic meditation practice was chanting. Many of them would memorize the entire Pali-Thai chanting book and would chant at home in the morning and evening. It was a calming practice, one that could bring joy into the mind, and the Thai translations provided them with key teachings at their fingertips. But Luang Por encouraged them to practise sitting meditation as well, and to cultivate a more profound understanding of their lives:

Don't forget to meditate on the mantra 'Buddho' and to reflect on 'head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth and skin' so as to see the fragility and impermanence of the physical body. Think about

\*When it became clear in 1983 that Luang Por's illness would prevent him resuming his teaching duties, Upāsikā Ranjuan decided to continue her training under Luang Por's great contemporary, Ajahn Buddhadāsa.

it, reflect on it continually ... When your thinking is correct, then your mind will be at ease. Undesirable consequences will disappear, and there will be no suffering. If your thinking is incorrect, suffering will increase.

In Dhamma books written in English, a handy distinction is made between the Pali word ‘Dhamma’ (‘the truth of things’; the teachings and practices that lead towards the realization of that truth) and ‘dhamma’ meaning ‘thing’. In Pali itself and in the Thai language, however, there is no orthographic means of distinguishing the two; and the pronunciation is identical. In fact, there is an organic relationship between Dhamma and dhammas (knowing Dhamma is, in essence, knowing dhammas) that Luang Por frequently referred to when he was trying to bring Dhamma practice down to earth for his audience and emphasize its practicality:

The word ‘dhamma’ means all things. There is nothing that is not a dhamma ... dhamma includes all phenomena that make up our body and mind.



The Buddha taught us to understand all things that are inside and outside of ourselves. The practices that enable us to do that are called Dhamma.



The understanding of these different meanings of the word demands that we understand ourself. If we understand ourself, then we understand Dhamma, because Dhamma lies within us.

He said that Dhamma practice consisted of developing the correct relationship to dhammas. The essential nature of dhammas is a constant arising and ceasing. This nature is unaffected by whether or not a Buddha is enlightened. It can never disappear from the world because it is the ‘way things are’.

Dhamma isn’t something that can become extinct. The enlightenment factors are still present and so are practitioners. The reason you don’t get enlightened is because you’re still so lax in your practice.

Dhamma practice wasn't some esoteric pursuit suitable only for monastics. It was a matter of developing wisdom about your own life. Sometimes, laypeople would come to him and say that they couldn't meditate because they were illiterate.

Why do you need to be literate? You put your hand in the fire and it's hot, you put it in water and it's cool. Do you understand that much? If you do, you can cultivate the Dhamma. The word '*bhāvanā*' is monks' language. In ordinary language, we say 'consider' or 'reflect'\* . Just know whatever arises in your mind. When anger arises in your mind, are you aware of it? Greed arises: are you aware of it? What's it like to be angry? What's it like to feel desire? Just keep looking at that. What else did you think it was about?

If you can move and breathe, if you know the difference between hot and cold, and between liking and disliking, then you can still practise the Dhamma because the Dhamma appears in this very body and mind. Don't think that Dhamma is a long way away. It's with us. It's about nothing else but us. Just look: one moment you're happy and the next, you're sad; one moment you're satisfied and the next, you're not. Then you're getting angry with that person and hating this one. That's all Dhamma.

Nothing belongs to us. We don't even belong to us. In the end, we disintegrate according to the law of impermanence ... Head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth and skin – If you contemplate these things well, then you will see them in their true light. These things are not ours, because they're not under our control. The whole body is the same. When it wants to hurt, it hurts; when it wants to get old, it gets old; and when it wants to die, then it dies. It never listens to us about any of it. When you get a headache or a stomach ache, has your body ever asked your permission first?

\*This word is often translated into English as 'meditation'. Below, Luang Por gives a more traditional definition of the term. Giving a new slant on familiar words was a common rhetorical device which he often employed.

It was mindfulness – bringing to mind, bearing in mind, all that need to be brought to and held there at any moment – that Luang Por taught was the key to practice. In daily life, one of the most important aspects of mindfulness practice was keeping the precepts in the forefront of consciousness. The meditator had to be constantly aware of the presence or absence of defilements in the mind. When someone asked him whether it was possible to do that all day he replied:

Right up until the day you die! All day's a bit too short a time.

As long as you were breathing, you could be aware. A woman complained that she had so many tasks to see to that she did not have time to practise mindfulness as well. He said:

That is your task. Maintaining mindfulness is a task. People who are mindful perform their tasks well. If you lose your mindfulness for two minutes, you're crazy for two minutes; for one minute, then you're crazy for one minute. Not speaking harshly to anybody – that is a mindfulness practice. You need to be aware of what mindfulness is and how it functions.

Are you thinking of harming others? Is your thinking wrong? Be aware of this. Others can't see your mind, but you can. With mindfulness encompassing your mind, then morality, concentration and wisdom can arise. Look into this. When you're going to say something, mindfulness is like having someone there telling you what to say who knows the implications of your words, and whether you're repeating yourself. When you don't know what to do, mindfulness knows.

*'Attanā codayattānam'*: 'You must admonish yourself' – that's how you become your own refuge. Otherwise, if you think you'd like to do something that's not right, you look about from side to side. You see your mother's not around, your father's not around, there's no teacher present, nobody can see you – okay! You do it immediately. Someone who thinks like that has already gone to the bad. You'll do something bad when nobody can see you. But

what about yourself? Aren't you someone as well ... Do you think it's possible to do something without this person seeing?

Luang Por summarized:

With constant mindfulness, everything is Dhamma ... If you know the Dhamma, it's not possible to lie to yourself or others.

Looking at the mind meant constantly monitoring it to see what was causing suffering. There had to be some kind of craving and attachment in the mind for suffering to arise.

It's very simple: look at where you're attached. When there's strong suffering in the mind, or so much happiness that you get carried away by it, then there's been an error.

The error was in taking ownership of the mental state. By exploring where the mind is stuck, mindfulness arises.

If you have constant mindfulness and alertness in every posture, then you will know right and wrong, you will know pleasure and sadness. And when you know what these things are, then you will know the method of dealing with them so that they do not cause suffering.

This is how I have people learn about *samādhi*. When it's time to sit, then sit for a reasonable time. That's not wrong either – know what sitting meditation is all about. But cultivating *samādhi* isn't just sitting. You must allow yourself to experience things and pass those experiences on for contemplation. So, what can you come to know through contemplation? You know that this is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not self. Nothing is fixed. 'This is beautiful; I really like it!' You caution yourself, 'It's changeful.' 'I don't like this at all!' Tell yourself, 'It can change, can't it?' That's utterly correct, no question about it.

But you go for things ... 'I'm going to do that!' It seems so cut-and-dried, and you're after it already. Don't do that. However much you like something, you must remember that the liking can change. You eat some foods and, 'Oh, this is delicious! I love it!'

That's how you feel about it. You must reflect that the feeling is not a sure thing. Do you want to know how it's not a sure thing? Try eating your favourite food every day. Every single day. Before long you'll be complaining that it doesn't taste so good anymore. Give it a try. Then you'll like something else instead. And that won't be a sure thing either. This needs to be taken up for contemplation. Everything's like the breath. There has to be inhalation and exhalation. The nature of the breath is to change. Everything that exists does so through this kind of change.

#### BOXING CLEVER

The unpredictable nature of our lives and the importance of making the best use of the time we have, was a major theme of Luang Por's teachings. Death can come at any time. Luang Por would say that by refusing to face up to the truth of our inevitable death, we don't see how important it is to abandon bad qualities and develop the good. Cultivating the mind is vitally important because at the time of death, it is the goodness that we have accumulated – the merit – that provides our true refuge.

Wealth and property will all be separated from you but the things which you have built up in your mind will not. If your mind is evil, it will take you on an evil path. If your mind is good, it will take you on a good path. Your possessions can't make you good or bad. Only your mind can do that. Understand this point.

Wise people prepare not only for physical death, but also for the small deaths of separation from the loved, by reflecting on the truths of life again and again – like boxers training for a fight by working on sandbags.

If they've never trained, or if they've never burst the sack of sand with their kicks, then when they get into the ring they have their teeth knocked out. When your health goes or your child dies or your wealth is lost then all you'll be able to do is cry, because you've never prepared for it. You'll be a boxer who hasn't done his training.

You must keep training yourself with the truths of impermanence, suffering and not-self. Constantly reflect on Dhamma.

Then when something happens you'll recognize it as just an expression of those things: impermanence, suffering and not-self. You won't suffer too much because you'll see it for what it is. Prepare yourself. You can't afford to be indifferent to this. If you were to climb into the ring right now, you'd be knocked straight out of it again. You have to train.

Luang Por said losses may be endured without tears and grief when they are seen through the perspective gained by training the mind. When the mind has developed Right View, it has an inner refuge and doesn't add any unnecessary pain to the loss.

But usually when there are fires and floods, you allow them to burn and flood your mind as well. When someone dies, you die with them. If that's the case, then you have no place of rest.

On another occasion, he compared this perception of impermanence to seeing a drinking glass as already broken. He said that the Buddha could see the broken glass within the unbroken. Anybody who could see the glass as already broken would not get attached to it, because they would recognize it as a temporary configuration of its constituent elements that would eventually shatter. All things should be looked upon similarly – as bearing within them their inevitable destruction – including the physical body. This did not mean that, being doomed to death, the body is useless and people might as well commit suicide. It means that it was to be put to good purpose as long as it was in a state to do so.

#### THE WISDOM OF ‘ENOUGH’

Luang Por spoke of elderly lay disciples who became discouraged and depressed by their growing inability to recall the words of the chanting texts, or to learn new ones. Luang Por said that memory loss was not an obstacle to Dhamma practice, because there was far more to Dhamma than chanting. In daily life, the Dhamma was to be found from searching for the right or optimal amount in every matter.

When you're eating you need to make the mouthful of rice just the right size in order to chew it conveniently. That is Dhamma. If the mouthful is as small as a monkey apple seed or as big as a

chicken's egg, then it won't be the right size; and that won't be Dhamma. It's the same when you're making a dress or a pair of trousers. They have to be just the right size for the wearer. Make them too small for the wearer and he can't put them on, too large and they look ridiculous. The clothes that you wear to the monastery, if they're clean and without holes, that's fine. If you're poor, then struggling to find the money to buy more expensive clothes, exceeding your income, just leads to difficulties.

Protect your mind from excessive desires for things which you don't need and have no right to. Pursue your desires in correct and appropriate ways. When you get what you want, there's no need to get overly happy about it, and when you lose something, don't get overly sad. Don't allow your mind to get carried away with forms, sounds, odours, tastes and touch sensations. Know whenever things coming into the mind are making it dull, sullied and disturbed, and use whatever means necessary to chase them out. This is what it means to practise Dhamma. The mind is most important. Acting well or speaking well depends on the mind. Harmful actions and harmful speech depend on the mind. That is why we need to train ourselves with sitting and walking meditation, and with reflecting on our experience.

#### 'THAT'S ALL IT IS'

One of the most enjoyable features of Luang Por's Dhamma talks was his use of everyday words and phrases to convey profound points of Dhamma. One such phrase was '*mun kor khae nun lae*', rendered here as: 'That's all it is.' It is one of those simple phrases that defy easy translation. It is used to deflate, often employed to tell somebody who is making too much out of a matter that it is less valuable, less important than they think; that it doesn't affect the main issues at hand; that it is, when all's said and done, a limited, unsatisfactory thing. The nearest parallel English expression might be the dampening, 'So what?'.

I'm going to give you a short, abbreviated teaching to use in your daily life. Everyone inwardly recite: 'That's all it is.' This one phrase is enough to reduce your suffering. Everything leaves us,

dies to us. However good and noble, beautiful or ugly things might be, they're all part of the world. You will have to leave them behind when you die. Don't attach to them at all. If you have a responsibility, then fulfil it. If it's your responsibility to make a living in order to look after your family, then go ahead. Make enough to live, enough to eat. Be content with what you can make – a lot or a little. Or if you're unsuccessful, then be at peace with your failure and then try again. Whatever the case, this mantra, 'That's all it is', is always appropriate. Your suffering will naturally recede. That's what it means to live wisely. Whenever you take things up to reflect on them, through this phrase it will all become Dhamma. These words can be used as a tool.

## BHĀVANĀ

Some five years or so before the end of his teaching career, Luang Por gave a talk to the lay supporters gathered together on an Observance Day night. It is a talk on the topic of 'bhāvanā' that summarizes much of his teaching on Dhamma practice:

'Bhāvanā' or 'cultivation', means the action of 'creating' or 'improving'.

Any effort put into creating or developing goodness and wisdom was bhāvanā. In fact, giving and virtuous conduct should also be seen as forms of bhāvanā. He said:

In giving, in keeping precepts, there must be Dhamma cultivation at every moment ... Even if you give a single lump of rice or a single pair of trousers or give just a small amount of anything, you feel happy because you've made a gift of something that belonged to you, with no buying or selling involved. After the gift has been made, both the one who gives and the one who receives feel content. Those feelings didn't exist before. The creation of those feelings is called cultivation [bhāvanā].

The benefits of giving did not end with the act itself. He also urged his audience to practise the meditation of 'recollection of generosity' (*cāgānussati*). By bringing to mind one's kind actions in the past, great

joy could arise in the mind and suppress the hindrances to lucid calm and wisdom.

Cultivation of the Dhamma was to be carried on in every posture. In daily life, the emphasis should be on reflecting on experience in the light of Dhamma.

Whether you're working or performing some good action, – whatever you're doing – cultivate the Dhamma by reflecting on what's going on. Cultivation doesn't just mean sitting. Standing can be cultivation. Walking can be cultivation. Sitting and lying down can be cultivation. In every posture, it means trying to make your thinking correct.

Luang Por used the word '*took tong*', translated here as 'correct', to mean conforming to the nature of things. Took tong was an important word for him. On one occasion, he summarized the Buddha's teachings with the words 'Dhamma means correctness.' By making thinking correct, he was not necessarily pointing to the cultivation of specific correct thoughts, but rather, to thinking that was free of defilement, thinking that took into account the realities of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self:

Not harming yourself or others, making whatever you do beneficial, doing only what is correct, speaking correctly, thinking correctly. All the kinds of correctness are the merit that arises from bhāvanā.

This effort to cultivate Dhamma by constantly looking at experience with the eye of wisdom, is rendered here as 'reflection', a translation of the Thai word '*pijarana*', which has meanings ranging from 'investigation' to 'consideration' to 'contemplation'. He pointed out to his audience that this power of reflection is not esoteric. Everyone already possesses it to some extent, and uses it in their daily life. A lack of it always causes difficulties.

Buying, selling, exchanging – whatever you're doing – you have to cultivate: you have to reflect, to consider. Your income is so much, your expenditure is so much, you need do this first and then do that, you need to plan things out – it's all bhāvanā.

Correct bhāvanā puts you at ease and makes the mind lucidly calm. Everybody – whether you live in a village, a monastery, wherever you are – if you reflect with a correct understanding of things, then it is bhāvanā.

The ability to consider things with a clear mind prevented being swayed by negative emotions or consumed by fear. He gave an example of the cultivation of wisdom in daily life by reflecting on experience:

I once heard Ajahn Buddhadāsa giving a talk on the radio. He said when he was a boy he was terrified of ghosts. He would take the cattle out to graze in the morning and return in the evening. On the way home, he would pass a cremation forest and he would be afraid and would climb up onto the buffalo's back. The buffalo would be munching grass indifferently. One day as he sat there on the buffalo's back he thought about it, 'Eh, this buffalo is better than me. It's not afraid of ghosts. It's happily chomping away on the grass. It's the one sitting on its back that is afraid of this and that, constantly full of dread.' As he considered it, he saw that fear arises from thinking. It is a conditioned phenomenon.

Using wisdom in daily life, he explained, is the ability to recognize and reflect on the impermanence of our experience. The wise person takes nothing for granted. Fools assume that tomorrow will be more or less the same as today and that we will be more or less the same person throughout our life. They are heedless of the truth of things, without perspective, caught up in whatever the present state of affairs happens to be.

Wealth, rank, fame, success – none of these things, if gained honestly, were bad in themselves. The problems came when people identified with them too much. The result was a form of intoxication.

Don't get drunk on these things. If you can get rich, then get rich. If you can't hold on to your wealth and become poor, then be poor – but don't get drunk on it. Don't be drunk with your poverty, and don't get drunk on your wealth. If you're suffering, don't get drunk on your suffering; if you're happy, don't get drunk on your

happiness. If you're young, don't get drunk on your youth; and if you're old, don't get drunk on your old age.

This heedlessness, the refusal to face up to these simple truths of life – that all beings are on a path to old age and death – feeds a pride and conceit that lies at the heart of human suffering. Luang Por, comparing relationships to a road, said problems arose the moment that people became lost in self-views:

In this monastery, in this Dhamma Hall, if anyone thinks, 'I'm better than you are' or, 'You're more stupid than I am', 'I'm more intelligent than you are' or 'You're not like me' and so on, bumps and potholes appear. Whenever anyone says or does anything, they look at each other with mistrust.

But, he said, reflection on the Buddha's teachings that remind us of our common humanity, 'will ease your anxieties and attachments'.

He told his audience that despite all the people sitting listening to his talk, there was just one thing really going on: the relentless, ownerless process of change. He said that the teaching that we can find nothing solid in our body or mind that is really who we are or truly belongs to us is difficult to take. People without self-awareness hearing such words get angry and complain that Dhamma talks on such matters are unpleasant or offensive.

When you say, 'Reflect on this: you were born to die, life is unreliable' – it's even worse. People get up and leave, they can't stand it. They think you're talking about base, inauspicious things. 'Things are born, and then they die.' The more these people hear, the more frightened they become. They don't want to listen and they leave.

But the truths of life are irrefutable, and it is wise to face up to them and reflect:

The Buddha taught us to cultivate. We are all the same. Rich or poor – we're born, we get old, we get sick and then we die in very similar ways. When you dwell on this kind of Dhamma reflection, then your mind will find an even consistency wherever you go.

But, as Luang Por would note, most people do not apply their minds in that way:

They grasp on to things until they suffer and then carry that suffering around with them without realizing what's happening.

He returned to his theme that he was teaching more than a meditation technique:

Bhāvanā doesn't mean sitting cross-legged with your eyes closed. Some people come to the wat every day, and on the Observance Day they practise sitting meditation. But as soon as they get home they throw it all away. They quarrel with their spouse or their children, quarrel with all the people around them, thinking that they are no longer meditating. When they meditate, they close their eyes in order to make merit. But when they finish meditating, the merit doesn't go with them. They just take the demerit. They have no endurance. They are not practising Dhamma.

Actually, this practice can be done anywhere – in the wat or outside it. It's like studying in a good school. Once you've learned how to read at school, then you can read at home, in the fields or in the forest. You can read in a group or you can read alone. If you know how to read, you don't have to run off to the school every time; you can read wherever you want.

His definition of someone who knows how to cultivate was:

When you have wisdom, whether you're out in the fields or you go into the forest, live in a big group or a small one, whether you're blamed or praised, you have a constant thorough-going knowledge of what's going on, and that's what it means to be a cultivator. You have to know the nature of all mental states. When you do, you're at ease, you're someone who knows how to bhāvanā. You have a single object.

Luang Por is using the phrase 'single object' (*ekaggatārammaṇa*) here in an unusual way. Whereas it would usually be used in the reference to the development of samādhi, in this context, Luang Por explained it to mean

‘no entanglement’. There is no entanglement with any object because the mind does not grasp at experience as self or belonging to self. Thus the mind dwelling on a single object does not mean that it is focused on one particular phenomenon, but on the nature of things – anicca, dukkha and anattā.

It is the letting go of attachment to phenomena through seeing their true nature that is correct cultivation.

Standing, you must be a cultivator; walking, you must be a cultivator; sitting, you must be a cultivator; and lying down, you must be a cultivator.

The reason why cultivation must be practised in all postures is because death can occur in any posture. Cultivation is a preparation for death. If you only cultivate in the sitting posture, what will happen if your death approaches while you are in another posture.

The same argument applies to the arising of defilement in the mind. Have you ever been angry? Have you ever been angry while you were lying down? Or are you only angry when you sit with your eyes closed? If you’re going to depend solely on sitting meditation, then how can you cultivate?

Cultivation means a thorough-going and comprehensive knowledge of what’s going on. The Buddha had us be mindful and have self-awareness, wisdom and circumspection while standing, walking, sitting and lying down, able to see the flawed and unflawed\* states of mind at all times. That’s what it means to be a cultivator. If you have this constant knowing, then nothing can affect you adversely, the mind is constantly smooth and at ease. The mind is in its normal state.

Towards the end of his teaching career, Luang Por read and was impressed by the newly published Thai translations of Chinese Zen Masters such as Huang Po. This became apparent in the way in which he began to talk

\* cf. the *cittānupassanā* section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN10). This phrase presumably refers to ‘surpassed’ and ‘unparalleled’ states of mind.

about the distinction between the mind itself\* and mental states. He started to use terms like ‘original mind’, not as philosophical positions but as skilful means to be used for looking within. At the end of this talk, Luang Por emphasized that people make a mistake in complaining about their mind being in turmoil. He said that there’s nothing wrong with the mind itself, it’s naturally at ease. It’s the defilements, the craving which are the problem. It was important to separate the two.

It’s like the leaves in the forest. Normally, the leaves are still. So when they flutter about, what’s the cause of that? It’s because of the wind blowing. If there’s no wind, then the leaves remain in their normal still state. Our mind, our ‘original mind’, is the same. It is naturally at peace and clean. What swings about all the time is a new mind, a false mind, constantly dragged here and there by craving: swinging between pleasure and pain. That isn’t the mind itself. Remember this point. When your mind becomes busy and confused, then remember what I’m telling you: this is not your mind. Your mind is free of all this; its nature is pure and clean. This is a false mind, an untrained mind. Go away and think about this, then you will know how to discriminate in your Dhamma practice. Don’t watch over anything else but your mind.

Luang Por said that Dhamma practice meant searching for the natural, original mind. Once that was recognized, then nothing could stir it up. So many people gave up cultivation because they thought their mind was too busy and confused; it was vitally important to know that the mind was never turbulent. The turbulence was the defilements.

The practice began and ended in the mind. It was not a matter of starting with generosity and precepts and gradually working up to meditation. Keeping the Five Precepts was necessary for keeping the mind free of disturbance, but the inner work was vital.

If you reach that place where the mind is in its normal state, there will be nothing to disturb you – like leaves in a windless place. Take this away as your homework ... Look into your mind. Keep

\*The term ‘mind’ can also be translated as ‘heart’ as there is no clear distinction between the two in the Thai language.

removing what is not so good until you reach the leaf that no wind blows. Reach the pure mind. The Buddha said that right there lies the path to freedom from suffering.

At the end of the talk, Luang Por gave a rousing call for diligence. Life is short and uncertain. Don't waste what little time you have.

'The days and nights are relentlessly passing. Right now, what are you doing?' The Buddha bashes people like this, and they're indifferent, they don't feel anything. The days and nights are passing, passing, never slowing down. What are you up to? What are you doing with your life? That's what he's asking. Ordinary people hear that and they're unmoved, but people who have supporting conditions hear this and they think, 'What am I doing? Am I suffering? Am I happy? What are the inner causes of that happiness? What would add to it?' That's how you should be thinking. You have to practise the Dhamma in order to realize the nature of your own mind.





XI  
*ice in the sun*

*Even gorgeous royal chariots wear out, and indeed this body too wears out. But the Dhamma of the wise does not decay; thus, indeed, say the wise amongst themselves.*

*Dhp 151*

# *Ice in the Sun*

*Luang Por's Waning Years*

## I. BODY SICK, MIND WELL

One day, as the illnesses that would go on to render him bedridden for the last years of his life were starting to take their toll, Luang Por Chah spoke to some lay supporters:

It's like you've got a horse – a wild fiery horse that's difficult to train. When it tries to run off, keep hold of the reins. Don't lose your grip on them. But if the horse is really galloping away full pelt, let the reins go. If you don't – then the next thing you know, your hand will be torn off. Let the horse and the reins go their way. Don't let yourself be hurt by it. Let it go. But if the horse is just straining on the rope a bit, then try to restrain it, master it. This is the way to relate to everything.

Our body is like a horse. If it gets ill, then we look after it with medicine. If it's going flat out on its way, and we can't hold on to it, then we let it go. We don't interfere with it. We let it go its way. That's all there is to the body: it's born, and then it goes its way. And then there's no caring for it any more. The body has run out of options. Let it reach its natural end ...

Everybody wants to live a long time. But the body is unable to do that. When it reaches its time and its place, then we have to let it

go. Don't make it suffer. Just be the 'one who knows'. Know that what is ours and what is not ours are mixed together. Wherever there is to be found what is conventionally referred to as 'ours', we find what is, in fact, not ours. Understand it like that. Then it won't matter if you're sitting or lying down in a hospital full of pain. If your view is correct, then you'll be at ease – at ease precisely where the pain is, at ease where the feeling manifests. The mind sees what is peaceful in the midst of turmoil.

Luang Por's understanding of pain and illness had matured after a lifetime that had seen its fair share of both. In his middle years, his physical endurance had been legendary. But by the age of sixty, Luang Por looked like an old man. In his uncompromising efforts to realize the Dhamma, his mind had reaped the rewards, while his body had paid the price.

Although he had suffered from the mild asthma that ran in his family, Luang Por had been a healthy boy. His first encounters with serious ill health occurred when he left the life of the village monk and set off into the forest. Details of Luang Por's health through his *tudong* years are sketchy. It is known that he contracted the usual fevers, including malaria, that afflict almost all forest monks at one time or another, and in 1951 he suffered an extremely painful stomach condition. But the main source of discomfort during this period was his teeth. In 1953 he endured a period of intense toothache and swelling of the gums. A visit to a dentist does not seem to have been an option. Years later, he revealed his favoured method of dealing with a rotten tooth. He would tie one end of a length of string to a small rock and the other end around the tooth. Then he would throw the rock with all his might out into the forest.

In 1967, the problem with his teeth got worse. His gums became so swollen that he was unable to eat for a number of days. Perhaps for the first time in his life, he went to see a local dentist. Against the dentist's advice, Luang Por insisted that all sixteen of his remaining teeth be extracted in one session.

While Luang Por did not opt for transcending dental medication, the impact of so many extractions on his nervous system rendered the injection he received almost useless. To deal with the pain, he put his mind into

a state of calm. It felt, he said, as if the sensations from every screaming nerve converged into one place. Then that gathered-pain started to contract until it almost disappeared, his mind observing the process with detachment. Nonetheless, after the dentist had finished, blood started to flow and did not stop until three days later. In 1981, as his health followed the downward spiral that would result in paralysis, he spoke of his tooth extraction to a group of visiting villagers:

By the age of fifty or sixty, your teeth start to come loose. Ohhh! You want to cry. You're eating, and you feel like tears are going to fall. It's like you've been elbowed or kneed in the mouth. The teeth ache so much: it's suffering, pain, torment. I've been through this myself. I had all my teeth pulled out. These in my mouth now – all false, every one of them. There were sixteen left, and I had them all pulled out at one go. I'd had enough of them. The dentist was scared to do it. I said, 'Go ahead. I'll take the consequences.' And so he did – extracted all sixteen. About five of them were still firm, but I had them out anyway.

As a boy, while I was grazing the cows and water buffalos, I'd take ashes from the fire and polish my teeth to make them white. When I got back home, I'd shoot myself a smile in the mirror just to see the whiteness. In love with my own bones! I was an idiot. I loved those teeth so much. I thought they were such good things. In the end, they had to go – and the pain almost killed me.

It was always easy to pick up some ailment or other on tudong. During one walk on which Luang Por was accompanied by his old lay disciple, Ta Soei, he contracted an eye infection. Ta Soei remembered that Luang Por saw his ailment as an opportunity to teach his companion a few home truths:

"Luang Por's eyes became very painful. I couldn't bear it. I tried to find some medicine for him, but he wouldn't use it. I didn't know what else to do, and I started to cry. He said:"

An old man almost on your deathbed and you're still crying. Laugh! It's only my eyes that hurt. You have to laugh as if it didn't hurt. You have to fight with death until you go beyond it.

“Two days later he must have remembered a remedy. He told me to find some *guysa* leaves, squeeze out the juice and apply it to his eyes. He said to me:”

This is kamma. I know what the cause is. This is the result of kamma I’ve created. When I was a boy, if I saw a gecko, I couldn’t leave it alone, I’d have to pierce its eyes where they bulge right out and then chop it up with onions and grill it on the fire. Really delicious too! Now that’s all caught up with me. Whoever creates good kamma gets good results; whoever creates bad kamma gets bad results. That’s how it is. Peoples’ actions always catch up with them. Don’t think that once you’ve done something, that’s the end of it. Whoever cheats somebody will end up being required to give back what they’ve taken.

In 1969, at the age of fifty-one, Luang Por suffered from a heart complaint that was treated by his physician, Dr Uthai. Some years later, in the mid-1970s, his body began the rapid decline that, within a few years, transformed it: the lean vigorous figure familiar to his early disciples morphing into the portly and prematurely aged figure by which he is now most widely remembered. He said that he was not surprised at this development. Considering the reckless way that he had treated his body in his younger days, he was more surprised that it had lasted as well as it had.

It was in England in 1977, during his first journey overseas, that the initial symptoms of the illnesses that would paralyze him and bring an early end to his teaching career, first appeared. On his return to Thailand, the episodes of dizziness and unsteadiness that had affected him abroad got worse. Some of the classic symptoms of diabetes began to manifest. The bottoms of his feet felt numb – he said he felt like he was walking on a mattress – and as a result, he began to use a walking stick.

Although there were concerns that another long trip abroad would have detrimental effects on his health, in 1979, Luang Por agreed to visit his disciples in England and from there flew on to America. He arrived in Seattle exhausted and spent the first few days resting. Chinese medicine and Korean ginseng, however, had a galvanizing effect. Before long, his

attendants were finding it difficult to keep up with him, and he returned to Thailand showing no obvious ill effects of his journey.

Back in Ubon once more, Luang Por announced that he would spend the Rains Retreat at the monastery in Bahn Kor where he had been a novice so many years before. It was a gesture of gratitude for all that he had received there. With Luang Por in residence, donations flooded in and he was able to oversee the construction of a new Dhamma Hall and kutis.

It was the first time in twenty-five years that Luang Por had not spent the retreat period at Wat Pah Pong. But by residing such a short distance away, he gave his deputy, Ajahn Liem, the opportunity to lead the Sangha during the retreat, while remaining close enough to offer counsel if the need arose. It seems that he was already addressing the need to introduce the Sangha to a time when he would no longer be there for them.

After the retreat, Luang Por returned to Wat Pah Pong where his condition slowly deteriorated. He felt a constant intense ache at the base of his neck. Massage gave next to no relief. Having always possessed an excellent power of recall, he now started to forget monks' names. He joked that his memory had decided to retire. There was no public announcement, as when civil servants retired from their posts, he said, 'There's just a whispering in your ear, I'm done.'

Periods of dizziness and unsteadiness came and went, arose and passed away. Late at night, Luang Por started to suffer from bouts of nausea, sometimes accompanied by vomiting. He lost his appetite and much of his strength. For a short period, a gift of high-quality Korean ginseng from a visiting Zen monk had a remarkable effect. During a meeting called to deal with certain accusations against a young novice, he spoke for seven hours. Some nights he would feel a sudden surge of energy and set off on walks around the monastery. But it could not last. Soon all the symptoms of his illness reappeared.

#### WORRYING SIGNS

In August 1980, Luang Por went for a check-up in Bangkok. The diagnosis by his disciples, Drs Suthep and Prapha Wongphaet, was that Luang Por was suffering from the following conditions:

1. High blood sugar (Diabetes mellitus).
2. Cerebral insufficiency, an impairment of blood supply to the frontal lobes of the brain with evidence of past stroke.
3. Periodic episodes of insufficient blood supply to the heart muscle (Coronary ischemia).
4. Chronic longstanding damage to the bronchi of the lungs, leading to the inability to clear mucous and secretions, often with a chronic cough and shortness of breath (Bronchiectasis).
5. Degeneration of the spinal bones of the neck (Cervical spondylosis).

Luang Por was prescribed various medications, and he returned to the monastery where he insisted on maintaining his tiring schedule. The attendant monks tried in vain to restrict the time that Luang Por spent receiving guests, but he would not agree to them turning away people who had travelled many hours to see him. Teaching energized him. On one occasion, a young English woman came to ask him a number of questions, and it was almost as if he were back to his old self. Afterwards, he said that it was as if each of her questions sharpened the knife of his wisdom. After his guests had left, however, he would be visibly drained.

As news of his ill health spread, more and more people arrived at the monastery with offerings of herbal remedies, nearly always accompanying their gifts with stirring personal testimonies of their potency. Luang Por tried many of them, sometimes merely in order to ‘celebrate the faith’ of the donor. Although he formed no great hopes for these treatments, it was true that during the hot season of 1981, his condition did ease a little.

But then it got worse again. By July of that year, the dizziness, unsteadiness and neck pain were intensifying. At a formal meeting of the Sangha, Luang Por stunned the community with the announcement that he would spend the forthcoming Rains Retreat period at Tam Saeng Pet, his branch monastery some 100 kilometres to the north of Ubon. After twenty-five consecutive retreats at Wat Pah Pong it was the second time in three years that he had chosen to spend the retreat elsewhere. The reasons he gave, when asked, were that the air on the hilltop would be good for his health, and that it would provide him with some respite from visitors. Tam Saeng

Pet was, also, a place close to his heart, and perhaps he wished to spend more time there while he could.

But although Luang Por spoke of Wat Tam Saeng Pet as a hilltop retreat far away from the crowds, it was, in fact, less than two hour's drive from Ubon on a good metalled road. Inevitably, as the retreat period progressed, news of Luang Por's whereabouts spread. The crowds were not deterred by the distance; on the contrary, the journey made for a nice day out. The custom by which the abbots of branch monasteries took their lay supporters to pay respects to Luang Por and listen to the Dhamma during the retreat continued as usual. Luang Por also maintained his custom of visiting branch monasteries during the Rains Retreat. This year, he seemed particularly determined to make sure his senior disciples understood his position regarding certain matters of the Vinaya.

Despite his ill health, Luang Por continued to give teachings during the three months that he resided at Tam Saeng Pet. They include some of the most profound and well-loved of his recorded talks. His illness had not yet interfered with the simple clarity of his teaching style, and he drew upon the objects around him to act as similes and metaphors for points of Dhamma in his old inimitable, exhilarating way. A tame monkey, offered as a gift and often screeching within earshot at inopportune moments, provided fertile ground for riffs on the restless 'monkey mind'. And it was here that he gave one of his most famous similes, illustrating how the mind that has been brought to tranquillity in the correct way, does not stagnate but bears within itself the impetus to wisdom, to seeing things in their true light:

It's like still flowing water ...

On one occasion, someone asked him, if he was so ill, why did he look so radiant? He drew an analogy with a car: you couldn't tell what was under the hood by looking at the chassis. When later asked a similar question, he replied that most sick people suffered, not so much from the illness itself, as from their desire to get better and the fear that they would not. As for him, he was unconcerned whether he got better or not. He was prepared for both outcomes, and so, didn't get worried or depressed.

On another occasion, when a lay guest inquired after his health, he replied simply:

These days I don't take much of an interest in it.

A sense of the atmosphere at Tam Saeng Pet on a weekend is well conveyed in Mae Somjai's account of her visit:

"Luang Por walked very slowly across the rocky area between the Dhamma Hall and the kitchen on alms-round. As soon as he appeared, everyone converged on him to put food into his bowl. Those who hadn't brought any food with them or were too late to prepare it in time for alms-round squatted on the ground, hands in *anjali*, expressing regret at missing the opportunity. At least they would get the chance to offer their food in the Dhamma Hall at the mealtime.

"After Luang Por had taken his meal, everyone waited for him to come out and talk with all the visitors in the Dhamma Hall. A huge number of people had arrived already, and there was a steady stream coming and going throughout the day. In the evening, it was a bit better. Most of the people who'd come during the day had gone home. I listened to Luang Por give teachings from early evening onwards. He didn't sit on the Dhamma seat, but on his usual seat on the monks' platform. He taught in a relaxed, informal way, and every now and again would chat with one or other of his guests. I remember at one point he talked about making mindfulness continual, and to show us what he meant he lifted his kettle and poured out the water, at first in drops, and then in a steady stream. It was one of the similes that he was fond of using in his talks.

"When it was time for him to rest, his attendant monk invited him to return to his kuti. We all just held our breath, fearing that he would leave us. It seemed like he had only just started talking. Luang Por smiled at the monk but didn't get up and, after a few moments, continued to teach for a while longer. The attendant politely repeated to Luang Por that he should rest now and we all groaned aloud – it was like a plea and a protest all in one. Luang Por smiled again and said to the attendant monk, 'I'll give them just a bit more', and he carried on until finally it really must have been time. Now when the monk invited him, he spoke in quite a firm voice, and picked up Luang Por's walking stick. He stood there with

his flashlight in his hand to show that he was ready to take Luang Por back to his kuti. The attendant turned to all us and said, ‘It’s already far past the time.’

“Luang Por smiled once more, comforting us like a father, and said, ‘They won’t give me any more time. I suppose I’ll have to go.’ It was as if the whole Dhamma Hall sighed with dismay. The time had flown by; it seemed that we had only been listening to him for a few minutes. I’d heard a Dhamma talk from Luang Por’s own mouth for the first time and I was utterly satisfied, but I still wanted to hear more.”

The monk with the torch in this recollection was Ajahn Pabhakaro, an American monk who was now Luang Por’s chief attendant. A veteran of the Vietnam War, he was 6 feet 3 inches tall, fluent in Thai and Isan. With his deep devotion to Luang Por and his attention to detail, he fulfilled a difficult task with great competence. Included in the job was the thankless task of playing the stern policeman.

At one point during this Rains Retreat period, the chairman of the Royal Privy Council and one of Luang Por’s old disciples, Prof. Sanya Dhammasak, came to pay his respects. Speaking about his illness, Luang Por said that he was ready to relinquish his body and not to worry about him. Prof. Sanya fervently requested him to remain in the world some time longer for the sake of suffering sentient beings. Twice he made his request without response. But after the third request, Luang Por grunted his assent.

#### LUMP OF ICE

One day while teaching a group of visitors, Luang Por said:

This Rains Retreat I don’t have much energy. I don’t feel well. My health is not so good. So I’ve slipped away to spend the retreat period here on this hilltop to enjoy the pure air. When my disciples and lay supporters have come to visit me, I haven’t been able to fully repay their faith [by teaching the Dhamma] because I hardly have any voice left; my strength to speak has almost gone. Actually, it’s a good thing that there’s still someone sitting here for you to see at all; in the future, there won’t be. My breath will

stop and my voice will be gone in accordance with the causes and conditions governing the body. The Lord Buddha called it *khayavayam*: the ending, the degeneration of conditioned things.

How does this degeneration take place? It's like a block of ice. It starts as water and then it gets frozen. Before long the block of ice starts to degenerate. Put a big block of ice out in the sun and you can see it happen. That's like the degeneration of this body. It occurs little by little. Before too many minutes, before too many hours have passed, the ice will be gone, all melted into water. This is called *khayavayam*: the ending, the degeneration of conditioned things. It's been this way as long as there's been a world. We're born carrying sickness, old age and death within us.

This was a constant theme over the next year or so. Later, many people remembered him telling them that, in the future, he would no longer be able to speak.

By the beginning of October, Luang Por's condition was causing deep concern. In the alternating pattern of good days and bad days that had been playing itself out over the past months, the ratio of good to bad was in steady decline. His scheduled appointment with the medical team at Samrong Hospital in Bangkok was moved forward and on his arrival there, he was given a CAT scan, newly available in Thailand. The scan revealed an accumulation of fluid trapped in Luang Por's skull. The doctors recommended a surgical procedure in which a cerebral shunt would be implanted inside the skull in order to drain the fluid down through a catheter into his stomach.

When the doctors first explained their proposal to Luang Por, he was not impressed. He nodded towards some fruit newly offered on a nearby table and joked with one of his attendants, 'The only thing that's getting cut up here is that watermelon.' But when he asked if it was possible to cure the condition without an operation, the doctors were blunt. They said that implanting the shunt could not be a complete cure – too much brain tissue had already been damaged beyond repair – but it was the only way they could see to retard further degeneration. Without the procedure, Luang Por could expect his condition to steadily worsen. The opinion of

other leading specialists was solicited. They were unanimous in agreeing with the prognosis. After consideration, Luang Por decided to go ahead with the operation. ‘Why not?’ he said, ‘Everything’s a risk. Crossing the road’s a risk.’ He hoped that it would at least enable him to do some more good for the *Sāsana* before he died.



It had been agreed at Wat Pah Pong some time before this that the Sangha should be consulted before any major decisions were made concerning Luang Por’s health care. For the first time, Luang Por ignored the protocol. A number of his senior disciples were already uneasy about the influence that they perceived (and much overestimated) Ajahn Pabhakaro and the Bangkok medical team were now exerting upon Luang Por. An operation on the head of the teacher (with all the transgressions of cultural taboos that entailed) would have created dissension with little prospect of a consensus emerging. Luang Por decided that he would present his disciples with a *fait accompli*. After all, he said – and not unreasonably – it was his head and no one else’s.

The operation took place on the thirtieth of October, 1981. On regaining consciousness after the operation, Luang Por refused pain relief. He said

this was the first time he'd ever had an operation, and he wanted to see what the pain would be like. In fact, he had planned on resisting the effects of the anaesthesia before the operation, but it had 'snuck up and clobbered him'.

#### DISAPPOINTING RESULTS

A few kilometres away from Samrong Hospital, in the eastern suburbs of Bangkok, stood the house of one of Luang Por's lay supporters, Khun Kesree Bulsuk. Khun Kesree had recently had a two storey kuti built in the grounds of her family home for Luang Por to make use of on his trips to Bangkok. It was here that Luang Por and his attendants went to stay in the first period of his convalescence. While he was residing there, one of the strange things that often occurred in his presence took place. A lavender bush in the garden had stopped flowering seven years earlier after the death of Khun Kesree's son. Now, on Luang Por's arrival, the bush suddenly came back to life. It flowered rapidly, constantly extending its tendrils in every direction. Before long, the tree was covered in clusters of flowers right up to its peak.

At first, the results of the operation were encouraging; but by the beginning of December, the old symptoms had begun to reappear. Luang Por was unsteady on his feet, sensitive to disturbance and weak enough at one point to be put on a saline drip. By the end of the year, however, there was a hope that that this recurrence of symptoms had been a temporary blip. Luang Por's voice became louder, and he could walk some way without a walking stick; he ate more and rested better. He spoke to laypeople and gave New Year's blessings. In the mornings, despite odd dizzy spells, he would try to go on alms-round.

In January 1982, Luang Por took up an invitation from a lay disciple, Dr Gertchy, to convalesce in his secluded seaside cottage, an hour's drive west of Bangkok. The fresh sea air seemed to induce a mood of optimism. Luang Por felt stronger, and the diabetes was under control. He was looking forward to returning to Wat Pah Pong, and it seemed that might be possible before too long. The attendants were pleased to know that a new kuti was being built for him there, in the middle of an artificial pond

and accessible only by a small footbridge. It was hoped that this would enable the flow of visitors to be governed more effectively.

In the meantime, Luang Por relaxed. He enjoyed listening to Dhamma talks on his cassette player. He was taken out for drives to nearby monasteries and stupas. Sometimes, he would ask an attendant to read from the Thai translation of the Zen master Huang Po that he was so fond of.

This bright period proved to be a mere interlude. By the beginning of March, Luang Por was suffering from frequent dizzy spells and nausea. He said his legs felt like jelly. He could not sleep and had no appetite. He started to talk about his death more often. Although he still had some good days, it was clear that, overall, his condition was getting steadily worse. Luang Por would eat no more than four or five mouthfuls of food a day. His sensitivity to sound increased as did periods of cloudy vision; he became easily disorientated. On the fourteenth of June, three days before his sixty-fifth birthday, Luang Por returned to Ubon.

#### WAT PAH PONG: JUNE-AUGUST 1982

On the seventeenth of June, a large number of monks, nuns and laypeople packed tightly into the Wat Pah Pong Dhamma Hall ready to celebrate Luang Por's return to the monastery and commemorate his birthday. He had been away for almost a year, and there was excitement in the air. Everyone was eager to see him again, keen to pay their respects and looking forward to hear him teach. Many of those who had been critical of the operation hoped that, with Luang Por back where he belonged and out of the clutches of the Bangkok doctors, he would soon recover his health. Only a few were aware of the true seriousness of his condition.

At last, the vehicle carrying Luang Por rolled up in front of the Dhamma Hall, and he was helped out of it. Ranged in front of him outside of the hall, laypeople sat many rows deep on either side of a cleared path. Women lay down their white shawls for him to walk upon. Luang Por moved with obvious difficulty into the hall, a senior disciple on either side of him, the towering Ajahn Pabhakaro behind. All bowed reverently as he passed. Many of those who took a discreet glance at Luang Por were visibly dismayed.

It was clear that there would be no rousing Dhamma talk. After the traditional 'Asking for Forgiveness' ritual had been completed, Luang Por spoke into the microphone with a weak echo of his normal voice. In a few laboured sentences, he delegated his responsibilities as abbot and preceptor, and he emphasized the need for harmony and dedication to the practice of Dhamma.

Even these few words exhausted him. And so, without expressing his happiness at returning to his home, and without providing a glimpse of the warmth and humour and wisdom his audience loved him for, he brought the final public address of his life to an end.

From this point onwards, Luang Por's physical decline gathered pace. He experienced intense headaches. The sound of the opening and closing of doors was irritating to him; the light of a torch beam or a camera flash painful to his eyes. His sense of balance became seriously compromised. He could barely lift his left arm and leg, and began to spend much of the time in a wheelchair. Luang Por's body clock went awry. He would suddenly decide that he'd like to go out for a tour in the wheelchair during the hottest part of the day, or wake up asking for things in the middle of the night. Perhaps most distressing were the mood swings. He became stubborn and resistant whereas formerly he had been the model of patience and self-control. He spoke much less and wore a strained, brooding expression on his face; when he did speak, his voice was almost inaudible. Sometimes he would mutter to himself and chuckle; other times, he wept. In a more lucid interval, he said to one of his attendants with his old lightness of manner:

If I start laughing, don't join in. There's nothing funny; it's just my brain condition. I can't control it. Just let me be crazy by myself. You don't have to be crazy like me.

One monk said, 'We understood what he was saying, but we couldn't help ourselves. When he laughed, we laughed. When he cried, we found we had tears in our eyes.'

It was difficult for the monks to see their teacher so reduced. A few privately admitted that if he had been afflicted by a purely physical disease, it would have been easier for them to bear. At least, the Luang

Por they loved and revered would not be dissolving in front of their eyes. Some became a prey to doubt: could this all be happening to a truly enlightened being? The more reflective monks realized that what was being thrust upon them in the most deeply unsettling form imaginable was the truth of *anattā*.

It is relatively easy to accept the idea of the body as not self, even by those who do not meditate. The changes that take place in the body throughout the day, and over weeks, months and years, culminating in death, offer persuasive proof of natural processes which lack any controlling agent (Luang Por would often say, ‘If the body’s really yours, can you tell it not to get old?’). However, the teaching that personality is also not-self is profoundly counter-intuitive. The belief in a unique individual entity, the ‘person’ – revealed most essentially in ‘personality’ – is a bedrock of human psychology and culture. Only the most skilled of meditators can penetrate the unexamined, false assumptions on which it is based. The monks around Luang Por were familiar with the teaching of *anattā* and had varying levels of insight into it, but for most of them, what was happening to him now was uniquely stressful.

Doctors from Bangkok flew up to examine Luang Por, suspecting a brain tumour. They advised another CAT scan in Bangkok, and the monks were informed that the Queen had offered to finance all future medical treatment. The Sangha, which had now taken over all decision making in the matter, convened a meeting. It was reported that Luang Por had recently sighed, ‘Enough of doctors. I’m done.’ But the difficulty of refusing the kind offer from the Royal Family, coupled with the hope that Luang Por might perhaps still recover, swayed the Sangha in favour of accepting the offer.

On the night of the seventh of August, the pain in the left side of his head had become so intense that Luang Por was unable to rest at all. On the ninth of August, he was taken on the Thai Airways flight to Bangkok, where he was admitted to Chulalongkorn Hospital. Ajahn Anek was one of the monks who accompanied him on the flight.

“Luang Por said that he had agreed to go to the hospital again to make his disciples happy. It wouldn’t be right for him to be a cause of concern to so

many people. But he wasn't going to get better; the illness was the result of old kamma.

"Luang Por repeated that, for him, everything had come to an end. In his heart, there was nothing left."

It's up to my disciples what they want to do to look after this body.  
As for me, it makes no difference.

#### CHULALONGKORN HOSPITAL: AUGUST 82-JANUARY 83

The conditions awaiting the monks in the hospital could not have been better. Luang Por was given a VIP suite that included a room in which he could receive guests, and a bedroom for his attendants. A team of six of the best neurologists in the country was on hand, and they conducted every possible test that the technology of the time would allow. They concluded from the tests that there was no tumour, merely an unusually rapid onset of the next stage of the illnesses with which he'd already been diagnosed: diabetes, cerebral atrophy secondary to arteriosclerosis, and multiple cerebral infarction. The condition of Luang Por's brain, the senior neurologist pronounced, was like that of a man of ninety. He was prescribed a cocktail of drugs for his brain condition, insulin together with a special diet for his diabetes, and daily physiotherapy.

Luang Por's hands shook. He was quiet and withdrawn, sometimes picking things up and then putting them down, again and again. The drugs helped a little. His appetite improved and so did his blood sugar levels. But new, worrying symptoms developed: if asked a question, his intended 'yes' would emerge as a 'no', and vice versa. Once, when asked if he needed to urinate, he said no. Then as soon as the receptacle was removed, began to urinate. For a brief second or two, it was funny.

Every day the attendant monks would lift Luang Por into his wheelchair and take him for a ride to a shady part of the hospital grounds. On one occasion, a woman catching sight of Luang Por dropped to her knees to bow to him, urging her young son to do the same. The boy ignored his mother. Remaining rooted to the spot, he stared with an unblinking gaze at the old monk in the wheelchair. With a great effort of will, Luang Por bent his body forward and extended his right arm very slowly towards the

boy in a gesture of blessing and loving-kindness. The boy moved forward in response and, hands in anjali, inclined his forehead onto Luang Por's open hand.

Such touching moments were becoming more and more rare. In October, Luang Por started to refuse to take the food that he was being spoon fed, clamping his jaws tightly shut and flailing his arms. Nobody could be sure whether he genuinely did not want to eat or if this behaviour was just another symptom of his illness. The attendants coaxed and cajoled and implored him to eat. For everyone involved, these were awful days.

At the beginning of December, Ajahn Liem told Luang Por that his speech no longer made sense and invited him to keep silent if he so wished. Luang Por seemed to be listening attentively. He never spoke again.\*

Two days after the invitation, Luang Por had a stroke. Violent convulsions shook all the strength out of the left side of his body. He was left looking like the shipwreck of a man, not long for death. The monks were determined that if Luang Por was soon to end his days, it should be in the monastery rather than a hospital.

The doctors were reluctant to discharge their patient, but when the Queen was informed of his condition and Luang Por's long-stated wish to spend the last days of his life at Wat Pah Pong, she settled the matter. An Air Force plane was arranged to take him back to Ubon. When Ajahn Liem informed Luang Por, 'he opened his eyes and looked about, which at that time was his way of showing that he was pleased.'

#### WAT PAH PONG: THE SILENT YEARS

Ajahn Liem was not convinced that this was necessarily the end. Luang Por was still only sixty-four-years-old. He believed that most of Luang Por's vital organs were functioning normally, and there was no reason why, if looked after well, he might not live on for years rather than months

\*Joseph Kappel, ex-Ajahn Pabhakaro, reports an occasion when Luang Por spoke one last word. On returning to Wat Pah Pong in January 1983, he asked Luang Por whether he would like to tour the area around his new kuti in his wheelchair, and Luang Por replied 'Yes' (literally: '!U' - 'Go!').

or days. ‘Longer than some of us’, he joked with another of the senior monks. And he was right.

On his return to Wat Pah Pong, Luang Por was invited to reside in a new custom-built dwelling constructed on an open piece of land at the northern end of the monastery. The ‘Nursing Kuti’, as it came to be known, was a brick-built bungalow in the modern Western style. It contained two main rooms: one set up like an intensive care unit in a private hospital; the other left unfurnished for use by the attendants. Brick walls projected at right angles from the midpoint of the kuti at either side, separating the private from the public domain. Doors in the walls allowed the attendants to admit visitors at agreed times, when the curtains of Luang Por’s room would be drawn.



Every day, people would come to catch a glimpse of Luang Por lying in bed, and to bow to him beneath the window. In the evenings, weather permitting, attendants would wheel Luang Por outside. Guests would gather on the lawn at the back of the kuti to pay their respects. The Nursing Kuti soon became a place of pilgrimage for people from every corner of the country. Once a week, the Sangha of Wat Pah Nanachat would come to chant a selection of the Pali verses that Luang Por had been

most fond of. Chief amongst these was the *Vipassanābhūmi* chant that lists the bases for insight.

A nursing schedule was established comprising fifteen-day blocks (following the monastic lunar calendar) divided into thirty twelve-hour shifts. A steady stream of monks arrived from branch monasteries to volunteer their services. Each shift was manned by four monks and one novice, with the night shift supplemented by a male nurse provided by Ubon General Hospital. A local doctor, who was a disciple of Luang Por, conducted a daily examination. It was agreed that there should never be less than two monks in the room with Luang Por at any time, day or night.

By the time Luang Por returned to Wat Pah Pong, his two chief attendants, Ajahn Pabhakaro and Ajahn Boonloet, had absorbed a great deal of knowledge about geriatric nursing. They began to pass on what they'd learned to the new volunteers. Both monks were intimidating, albeit in different ways: the American Ajahn Pabhakaro for his sheer physical presence and the ease with which he could shift into his old military officer persona when circumstances demanded it; Ajahn Boonloet, a Thai of Chinese ancestry, for his unusually direct manner and his unwillingness to suffer fools gladly. For this particular job, they were perfectly suited.

Each nursing shift was selected to include a mixture of the experienced and the untried. Monks learned how to lift and turn Luang Por, how to carry him to the toilet, how to make beds, how to take important measurements and make records. They learned about nutrition, physiotherapy and more. Although the monks were new to all this, they were highly motivated – nursing Luang Por was considered by them a great honour – and the Vinaya discipline had already accustomed them to the adoption of extremely precise and detailed procedures for relating to the physical world. Infection was the greatest danger, particularly through the respiratory tract. The swabbing and sterilizing routines acquired an almost religious tone. After some years, when doctors recommended using a nasal feeding tube, the attendant monks experimented with it on each other, before using it on Luang Por.

Although Luang Por was silent and largely unresponsive, he was treated with the same respect as he had always been. The attendants adhered

strictly to the customary forms of address, preventing any lapse into careless or overly familiar behaviour. They bowed to him when entering or leaving the room. Before touching his body for any reason they raised their hands in anjali and asked his permission. They spoke in low voices in his presence and only on necessary matters. Often, in a corner of the room, an attendant monk with free time would sit quietly in meditation.

In the early years, Luang Por occasionally showed some interest in the external world, not least on the twenty-sixth of February, 1983, when the Queen was the guest of honour at the Uposatha Hall consecration ceremony. While visiting Luang Por at the Nursing Kuti, the attendants noticed Luang Por making an immense effort to maintain his sitting posture and remain alert.

On her return to Bangkok, the Queen arranged for Luang Por to receive regular treatment from a particularly gifted masseur in her employ. Initially, the massages produced some small improvements, but these were nullified by further seizures and were discontinued after three years. In late 1984, the most violent seizures so far required Luang Por to spend some days in the ICU room reserved for him in Ubon General Hospital, where he was also treated for pneumonia.

The next major crisis came in March 1987. Luang Por, suffering from severe breathing difficulties, was rushed to Ubon Hospital where it became clear that without drastic intervention, he would not survive. The doctors advised a tracheotomy. It was the first serious test of how far the Sangha elders were prepared to go to prolong Luang Por's life. Most monks had long been opposed to anything they believed to be 'unnatural' treatments. Invasive procedures had always been considered the step too far.

An emergency meeting chaired by the governor of Ubon was attended by senior monks and doctors. The doctors put their case passionately. They reassured the monks that the process was quick, safe and reversible. Most importantly, there was no alternative. Logic was on their side, and the monks were badly torn. Whatever their views on natural death, the sight of Luang Por fighting for every breath and choking on his phlegm was difficult for them to endure. A tipping point was reached when they were

informed that the Queen had entreated them to give permission. The operation was performed that day. Less than a week later, Luang Por had recovered sufficiently to return to Wat Pah Pong.

In the period following the tracheotomy, Luang Por showed a new resistance to being fed. A troubled Ajahn Liem formally requested his forgiveness if they had made the wrong decision, and begged him to take nourishment. Luang Por acquiesced.

For the following five years, the story of Luang Por's condition was one of inexorable decline. Periods of relative stability were brutally truncated by crises, each one of which, having been weathered, left his body functioning on a slightly reduced level. He was hospitalized on a number of further occasions with pneumonia.

An account of the atmosphere in the Nursing Kuti during this period was given by Ajahn Anando, the American abbot of Cittaviveka Forest Monastery in England. In late 1988 he returned to Thailand to visit his old monastery, and to offer his services to his teacher.

"I like the early morning very much, because you can spend time alone with Luang Por. From 2 a.m. until maybe 5 a.m. is the period when he seems to sleep the most peacefully. Then, a rather busy time follows. Depending on what day of the week it is, we might clean part of the room, very quietly, and prepare things for waking him at 5.30 to bathe and exercise him. Then, the weather and his strength permitting, we put him in the chair – the one that was sent from England with the money offered by people in the West. It's a really superlative chair, it does everything except put itself away at night!"

"There is a sense of great respect and affectionate caring that goes into the nursing. Although he has been bedridden for almost six years, he has no bedsores; visiting doctors and nurses are quite amazed at the good condition of his skin. The monks who are nursing him never eat or drink anything, nor sleep in the room. There is very little talking; usually you only talk about the next thing you have to do in his care. If you do talk, you talk in a quiet manner. So, it is not just a room we nurse him in, it is actually a temple."

In 1990, Luang Por suffered from heart failure due to clogged arteries, and once more, he survived. But time finally ran out at the beginning of 1992. Luang Por's kidneys started to shut down, and the essential organs depending upon them inevitably followed. Early on the morning of the sixteenth of January, Luang Por, Phra Bodhinyana Thera, the monk known throughout the Theravada Buddhist world as Ajahn Chah, passed away.

## II. MORE TO IT

### REFLECTIONS

In February 1941, the 82-year-old arahant Luang Pu Sao, teacher and companion of Luang Pu Mun, arrived by boat at a small riverside temple in Champasak, southwest Laos. He had fallen ill some time before leaving Thailand. Now on his way back to Thailand from an exhausting trip, he had spent the long journey upstream lying down with his eyes closed, apparently unconscious and clearly close to death. As the boat tied up at the jetty, he opened his eyes and asked, 'Have we arrived? Take me to the Uposatha Hall.' His disciples half-led, half-carried him into the building. Once inside, he somehow managed to pull himself into a sitting posture and asked for his outer robe to be folded over his left shoulder. He began to meditate. After a few minutes had passed, he came out of the cross-legged posture in order to bow three times to the large Buddha statue in front of him. After a while his disciples realized that he had not moved for some time. They rushed over, checked for a breath on a small mirror, and found none. Luang Pu Sao had passed away while prostrating before the Buddha.

To a Buddhist, Luang Pu Sao's death is deeply inspiring. Many arahants, from the time of the Buddha onwards, have left the world in similarly uplifting ways; some, like Ven. Ānanda even gracing their departure with a display of psychic powers. But this has never been the norm. Indeed, Ven. Mahā Moggallāna, one of the Buddha's two chief disciples, died at the hands of a group of brigands, 'who pounded his bones until they were as small as grains of rice'. In the modern period, two of Luang Pu Mun's most revered disciples died in a plane crash, and some years later, another

came to his end in a car accident. Countless others have died after painful illnesses.

These examples make it clear that enlightenment gives no automatic protection from protracted illness or violent death. In their final lifetime, arahants must work through any unresolved kamma committed in previous lives. This was true of the Buddha himself. He linked the injury he sustained, when a rock was thrown down at him from a mountain by his evil cousin, to old kamma. Over and above the more measurable physical factors leading to Luang Por's last years of illness, his disciples have always considered kamma to be culprit-in-chief. He himself, as mentioned above, viewed it in that way.

The unresolved question, drawn into sharp relief by the development of medical technologies, is how far the care of one believed to be an arahant should be taken. How far, in other words, should medical intervention be permitted to play a part in the working out of the arahant's kamma? Many disciples of Luang Por, particularly the generation that could remember his early opposition to modern medical care, were uneasy about the extent of the treatment he received. Their views were summed up by Luang Ta Maha Bua, the great disciple of Luang Pu Mun, in his customarily fiery manner:

“Me and Ajahn Chah, we know each other well, we respect each other very much, and I don't want to hear that he's been imprisoned and hooked up with wires ... Doing that to a monk of his stature, it's completely inappropriate. Listen to me: it's completely inappropriate ... to put it simply, you're completely smothering him with the world. The Dhamma in his heart is bright, radiant, immeasurable, and it's unable to manifest. There's nothing but worldly things enveloping him. It looks repulsive. If he says he can't carry on, then let his body go accordingly. That's my opinion.”

But Luang Por's own expressed wishes on the matter were ambiguous. He had said different things at different times in different contexts. The period when his brain condition caused him to say exactly the opposite of what he meant to say stuck in everyone's mind and complicated matters. After he stopped talking, it was hard for anyone to be really sure about

his intentions. There were periods when he was unwilling to take food and did everything in his very limited power to avoid doing so. To some of Luang Por's disciples, this was a clear indication that he did not want to carry on living in the state he was in and desired to be left to die in peace. To others, it was merely a symptom of his illness. They pointed out that when they persevered or pleaded for Luang Por's co-operation, he invariably complied. To which would come the retort, 'Of course he did. What choice did he have?' And so on. Only one thing was indisputably clear: all of Luang Por's disciples were united by the same wish to do the right thing. It just was not always so easy determining what that right thing was.

As for the doctors, they considered it to be both their ethical and legal duty to offer every available treatment. To fail to do so would have been criminally negligent. Furthermore, the kamma that might be incurred by them allowing an arahant to die unnecessarily was a truly frightening prospect. On a more worldly level, the doctors were aware that any mistakes they might make in the care of such a universally loved figure would deal a crushing blow to their professional reputations. Also of considerable weight were the wishes of the Queen. She was in favour of pursuing every available avenue to extend Luang Por's life.

Perhaps the most telling testimony is that of Ajahn Liem, Luang Por's Dhamma heir at Wat Pah Pong. He was adamant that Luang Por could always understand him throughout his illness, and used his eyes to indicate assent and dissent. He said that at Chulalongkorn Hospital, 'Luang Por had no wish to live on, but we couldn't let him go.'

#### ANOTHER DIMENSION

Whatever the case, most of Luang Por's disciples took as their refuge the belief that he had finished his work and had gone beyond all mental suffering. They learned to see the decay of his physical body as perhaps their greatest teacher of the truths of old age, sickness and death. Even silent and bedridden, Luang Por provided them with profound teachings on impermanence, suffering and not-self. And Luang Por's physical condition was not the whole story by any means. While his body might be seen and reflected upon by anybody with a good pair of eyes, the state

of his mind remained invisible to all but the most gifted meditators. But every now and again, unusual events occurred that reminded everyone that Luang Por was no ordinary patient.

One of the first of these occasions occurred when, just prior to the day of the Queen's visit in 1983, a four-man army security team arrived in the monastery. Monks watched them with some bemusement as they searched for weapon stashes and land mines. One soldier carried a large radio pack on his back and checked radio communication links sector by sector. On reaching the Nursing Kuti, the attendants asked the soldiers to take off their boots. The soldiers ignored them and conducted their search, showing scant respect even for the old sick master they found in the inner room. Once outside, the radio operator tried to make contact with headquarters. He was surprised to find the radio dead. The soldiers walked back towards the main gate, and as they did so, the radio began to work again. However, on their return to the Nursing Kuti, it went dead once more. The puzzled soldiers asked the attendant monks if there was some magnetic field around the kuti. The monks said that they did not think so.

The soldiers started to become anxious. If they did not radio their HQ from these coordinates in the next few minutes, they would get into trouble. One of the attendants offered a suggestion. He said that the way they had burst into the kuti earlier had seemed very rude and disrespectful. They should take off their boots, bow to Luang Por and ask for his forgiveness. With some reluctance, the soldiers agreed. At the very moment their heads touched the floor, the radio squawked loudly and came back to life. White-faced, the soldiers asked for forgiveness with genuine feeling.

Another event, witnessed by Ajahn Nyanadhammo, occurred during the crisis of 1987.

"Luang Por was in the Intensive Care Unit at Ubon hospital and looked certain to die. Ajahn Liem was already preparing the funeral arrangements. Luang Por was on oxygen and lying there very still. The doctors checked the oxygen intake, and they could find no measurable breath. They took the mouthpiece off, shook the gauge, thinking there was

something wrong with it. They tried it on another patient, and it was working normally. But when they put it back on Luang Por, they could still find no measurable breath. They began to worry he might be brain dead. They took a blood sample and were amazed to find that the oxygen level was completely normal. They said to Ajahn Liem, ‘This just doesn’t make sense. He’s not breathing, there’s no measurable pulse, and yet the oxygen level in his brain is normal.’ Ajahn Liem just said, ‘He’s entered jhāna.’”

But most moving to the attendant monks were the words of Luang Por’s great contemporaries who visited him at the Nursing Kuti. On one occasion, Ajahn Phut, the most well-known living disciple of Luang Pu Sao, asked for some private time to meditate by Luang Por’s bedside. On emerging from the room, he said to the monks present:

“Luang Por’s mind is like the full moon. It is very radiant. His mind is peaceful and still at all times. But when he is offered food or someone attends on him, he is aware at every moment. He knows everything that is going on.”

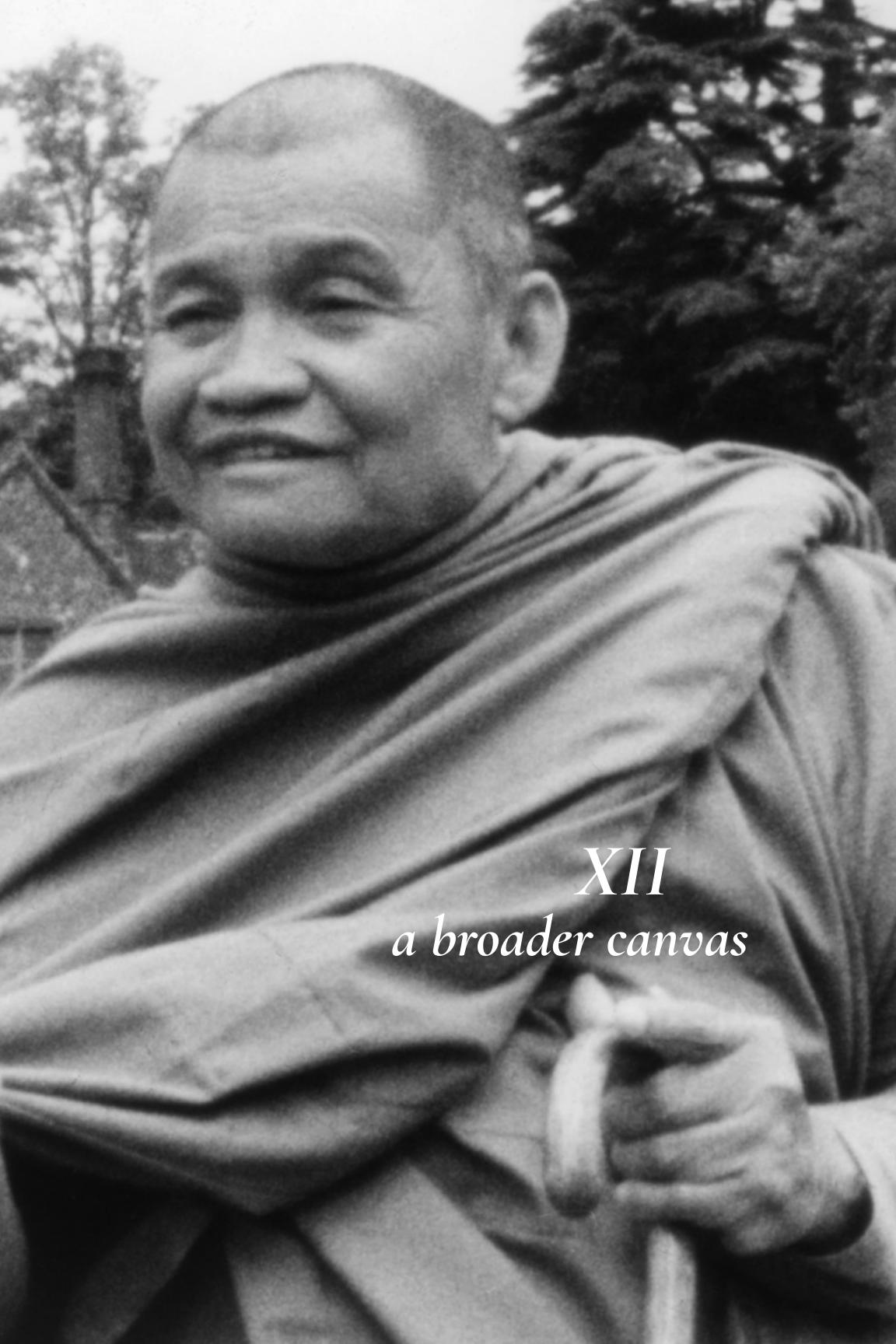
#### SILVER LININGS

That Luang Por’s death was preceded by a long illness could not, in any sense, be labelled a blessing in disguise. It did, nevertheless, lead to a number of long-lasting benefits to the Wat Pah Pong Sangha. Firstly, it provided a long period during which the Sangha was able to learn how to adapt to life without him as a leader but with him still present as a uniting figurehead. Rather than disintegrate, the Sangha grew – an unprecedented development for a forest monastery that had lost its teacher. During the period of Luang Por’s illness, the number of branch monasteries increased by almost a hundred.

Secondly, the huge long-term commitment necessary to sustain the quality of Luang Por’s nursing care brought the Sangha together. Friendships were forged between monks from different monasteries on shared nursing shifts that stood the test of time. This complex web of relationships that developed, further enhanced the harmony and sense of brotherhood for which the Wat Pah Pong Sangha was already renowned.

The monks who served Luang Por benefited from the opportunity to express their gratitude and devotion to him, as did the maechees who prepared his special diet every day. The attendants learned geriatric nursing techniques that were to be of great use in the coming years as more and more of the senior disciples entered their old age. The huge number of visitors over the years gained the immeasurably good kamma of paying respects to a noble being. All of these benefits were, without doubt, considerable silver linings. And yet, for many, they could not conceal the cloud of regret that Luang Por's life of training and teaching his disciples should have come to such an early end at the age of sixty-four.





XII  
*a broader canvas*

*On hearing the Teachings, the wise become perfectly purified - like a lake deep,  
clear and still.*

*Dhp 82*

# *A Broader Canvas*

*Luang Por in the West – 1977 & 1979*

## I. INNER LAND – OUTER LAND

In 1976, Ajahn Sumedho returned to California in order to visit his parents. On his flight back to Thailand, he stopped over in London for a few days as a guest of the English Sangha Trust (E.S.T.), a body set up to establish a Theravada Sangha in England. For the duration of his visit, Ajahn Sumedho stayed at Hampstead Vihāra, a four-storeyed terraced house belonging to the trust on the busy Haverstock Hill road, a mile or so south of Hampstead Heath. The E.S.T. had suffered years of frustration and disappointment in their efforts to promote a home-grown Sangha. In Ajahn Sumedho, they saw someone who might finally turn their dreams into reality.

Ajahn Sumedho's thoughts had already been turning towards the West, and he was impressed by the dedication of the members of the trust. Following Ajahn Sumedho's return to Ubon, George Sharp, the president of the E.S.T., flew out to Thailand in order to request Luang Por Chah's permission for Ajahn Sumedho to establish a Wat Pah Pong branch monastery in England. His arrival was greeted not with a red carpet but a rush mat. Luang Por was still away on a journey, and had instructed Ajahn Liem, his deputy, to have George sleep on the floor at the back of the Dhamma Hall, eat one meal a day out of an enamel bowl and join in the life of the monastery. On his return, Luang Por agreed to discuss the proposal,

presumably satisfied that George Sharp was sincere and had more than a passing acquaintance with the virtues of humility and patience.

Luang Por did not dismiss the notion of a monastery in England out of hand, but said that he would not feel comfortable about granting permission without having seen for himself the suitability of the conditions. On behalf of the English Sangha Trust, George Sharp invited him to accompany Ajahn Sumedho to England the following May, and Luang Por accepted.

Luang Por set off on his first ever trip abroad – and his first flight on an airplane – on the sixth of May, 1977. Accompanying him and Ajahn Sumedho, were an English monk, Ajahn Khemadhammo, and Dong, a lay supporter from Ubon. In honour of the special nature of the trip, Luang Por decided, for the first and only time in his life, to record his experiences in a journal. In it, he recounts that as he sat in the plane he reflected on the Buddha's teaching that going to a strange land, in which you are unfamiliar with the language or the customs, you should not be conceited or attached to your own ways.

The theme of adaptation was to recur in the journal throughout the journey. As he looked out on the billowing clouds, he developed an elaborate play on the Thai word for 'overseas' which means literally 'the land outside', comparing 'the land outside-inside' and 'the land inside-outside'. It was the first of many puns and passages of word play that occur throughout the journal. But the first pages were also to have more dramatic content. Mid-air, one of the plane's wheels exploded.

The air staff made an announcement that we should fasten our seatbelts. People with false teeth had to take them out. People even had to take their glasses and shoes off. We had to see to our personal belongings. After the passengers had stowed everything away, everyone was silent. They were probably thinking it was the end of their life. I was thinking that this was the first time that I had travelled abroad to do something useful for Buddhism, and was this really all the merit I had? Once I'd thought that, I then made a vow, dedicating my life to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and settled my mind in a suitable place.

I felt a lucid calm and coolness as if nothing was happening and rested in that place until the plane came down to make a safe landing. The passengers clapped their hands with joy at being safe. The strange thing was that when the accident occurred, various people pleaded with me, ‘Luang Por protect us!’ But when the danger was over and we disembarked from the plane, only one person came up to thank the monks. Everyone else went over to thank the air crew. That was the strange part.

Ajahn Sumedho’s concerns about how Luang Por would react to conditions in the West were soon allayed. After the plane’s emergency landing in Rome, the passengers were asked to leave the plane and board the airport buses that would take them to the transit lounge. By the time the monks had disembarked, their bus was packed tightly. Many of the passengers, inevitably, were women. It was the first test of how Luang Por would cope with a new and alien world in which women did not keep a respectful distance from monks. As Ajahn Sumedho looked on somewhat tensely, Luang Por simply put his head down and marched onto the bus, ignoring the proximity of the women.

Luang Por noted in his journal that he did not find it especially difficult to adapt his body, speech and mind to the new environment. ‘The unusual part was what appeared at my eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body,’ he wrote. ‘My mind was the same as normal.’ His initial response to what he saw around him – no doubt tinged by the reports of his Western disciples in Thailand – was of a fundamental lack. He wrote: ‘They have developed their country materially, but because they lack the Dhamma, they have found no contentment.’

On the first day in London, Luang Por was taken to see the sights and, in the afternoon, went for a walk on Hampstead Heath. He was impressed by the lushness of the grass and the unfamiliarity of the trees. In the evening, he recalls:

At about eight o’clock, nine people came to listen to the Dhamma, some of whom had previously been to visit Wat Pah Pong. I taught them the Dhamma that is ‘beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle and beautiful in the end’.

Afterwards, I answered questions with Ven. Sumedho translating my replies into English. They had prepared to chant the formal request for the Five Precepts, the first time that had occurred. After I had finished my talk, I led them in a meditation session for thirty minutes. I felt that they revealed a natural disposition with close affinities to the Dhamma.

The next day, George Sharp drove Luang Por and his party to Birmingham ('a city', he noted in his journal, 'that has branched off from London') for a Vesakha Puja celebration that included monks from all the Buddhist traditions, and at which Ajahn Sumedho had been invited to give a talk.

It was a day in which I saw laypeople of many nationalities gather together to listen to Dhamma in many different languages. I couldn't understand any of the words they used, but I could understand their meaning by looking at their manner and gestures.

A few quiet days followed. At this time, Luang Por was as yet not widely known in Western Buddhist circles. The number of English people interested in Theravada Buddhism was still small, and of that number, even fewer were aware of the Thai Forest Tradition. Later that year, Jack Kornfield's book, *Living Buddhist Masters*, would be published and the name of 'Ajahn Chah' would become more familiar, but for the time being, he was still an obscure figure. If his trip were to have taken place thirty years later, he would have been inundated with invitations to take his daily meal in Thai restaurants; but at that time, Busabong, on King's Road was the only one in London. The number of Thai residents in Britain was still in the low hundreds rather than the forty-thousand of today. The advantage of his anonymity was that Luang Por could rest quietly in the vihāra in a way that would have been difficult for him in Thailand.

His next outing was a courtesy call to Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon, a temple sponsored by the Thai government for the purpose of providing for the spiritual needs of Thais resident in the United Kingdom. The visit was not only a matter of protocol, it was also an opportunity to make useful contacts with members of the Thai Sangha already living in England, to ensure their support and to request the blessings of the senior

monk for the establishment of a new monastic community. It was given with good grace.

The next day, the party travelled to Oxford where they were to be the guests of the Saws, a wealthy Burmese family who owned a large estate in the countryside a few miles to the west of the city. It gratified Luang Por that, in the morning, the monks were offered food in their bowls at the front door of the main house in the traditional manner. ‘It was an auspicious occasion’, he wrote, ‘and fulfilled my vow of establishing the custom of alms-round in England.’ In the evening, he taught the family meditation. In his diary, as in almost every daily summary, he referred to the ‘benefit created’ that day. It was clear he had little interest in sightseeing. For him, the value of this long journey was in the ‘benefit created’.

The visit to Oakenholt gave Luang Por his first glimpse of a ten-day meditation retreat. A group of prefabricated huts, built on the estate during the Second World War, was now functioning as a retreat centre, and a retreat led by John Coleman, a teacher in the Burmese U Ba Khin tradition, was underway. Luang Por was impressed by the obvious sincerity of the meditators. After visiting the group and speaking to the teacher, he concluded in his diary that the Buddhist lotus was starting to bloom in the West.

#### A LOT FOR A LITTLE

Luang Por’s enthusiasm for his diary continued to wax and wane. On a number of days, he recorded little in it but the briefest summary of his daily activities. But on the fifteenth of May, back in London again, he felt inspired:

At about seven o’clock this morning, sitting in a quiet peaceful place, many insights arose in my meditation. Afterwards, I picked up my pen and paper to record them.

Emerging from ‘a profound part of his mind’, he wrote:

I realized that, as a monk following in the Buddha’s footsteps, there were still many matters related to the *Sāsana* that I had not

yet fully accomplished, things which I was still neglecting: firstly, concerning place; secondly, concerning persons; and thirdly, concerning time. I reflected that truly following the teachings of the Buddha meant that, having created a sufficient amount of benefit for oneself, one should create benefit for others.

It is, in fact, a somewhat puzzling passage. Luang Por's conclusion that the life of a monk is only complete when he shares his understanding with others is quite clearly one that he had held for a long time. Indeed, a few days previously he had written, 'One must sacrifice everything for the Sāsana, primarily for the benefit of sentient beings.'

So, I am of the opinion that England deserves to be considered *patirūpadesa*, 'a land suitable for the propagation of Dhamma', which is why I have arranged for Western disciples to live here on a regular basis and carry on the work of the Sāsana.

The style of teaching Dhamma here should be of doing a little and getting a lot, doing a lot and getting a little; teaching people to see that the cool exists in the hot, and the hot in the cold; the wrong lies in the right, the right in the wrong; pain lies in pleasure, and pleasure in pain; progress lies in regress, and regress in progress; the little lies in the big, and the big in the little; the dirty lies in the clean, and the clean in the dirty. This is called '*saccadhamma*' or else the science of truth, '*saccasaht*'.\*

All of us who are disciples of the Buddha must practice in order to develop four qualities to their full extent: S.U.Ñ.S. (*supatippanno*, *ujūpatippanno*, *ñāyapaṭippanno*, *sāmīcipatippanno*),\*\* and then teach the Dhamma in a way true to the Buddha's intentions. We must study the science of truth and then realize truth itself. 'Realization' means to come to the end of the last sentence. That is what is called 'the One Dhamma': no more sentences of the teachings remain. It is 'reaching the end of the Holy Life', in which, in the

\*'The science of truth'. A compound of two Thai words, one derived from Pali and the other from Sanskrit.

\*\*The four qualities of the *Ariya Sangha*: 'They are those who have practised well (*supatippanno*); practised directly (*ujūpatippanno*); practised for liberation (*ñāyapaṭippanno*); practised fittingly (*sāmīcipatippanno*).'

midst of ‘things’, there is ‘no-thing’. If disciples fully comprehend the Buddha’s wishes in this way, then they may travel around alone, both internally and externally.

Those monks are the ones who know what is what. When they know that clearly, then the knowledge of ‘enough’ emerges into their minds. When ‘enough’ has emerged, then simultaneously there arise all kinds of righteousness. The Dhamma that manifests in the mind is prominent day and night; prior assumptions about what is what and what things mean have come to an end.

This Dhamma will not appear with any clarity merely through the words of another; it will only manifest through practice. It is *paccatam*: you can’t teach it to anyone, you can’t tell anyone about it, you can’t study it. As the Buddha said, ‘*Akkhātāro tathāgatā*.’ ‘The Tathāgata\* is merely the one who shows the way.’ The meaning of that phrase becomes supremely clear, free of all doubts. This is the Buddha’s goal.

#### STRANGE BUT FASCINATING

While he was in England, Luang Por met a number of monks from other Buddhist traditions. One of them was an English Zen monk, trained in Japan, called Seng-ko. Luang Por ‘interviewed’ him about the teachings and the way of life of Japanese monks, a summary of which he later entered in his diary. On asking how many precepts the monks in Japan keep, he had been told that, ‘constant mindfulness is their *sīla*’, which Luang Por found a ‘strange but quite fascinating idea’; he was told that there were two kinds of monk: one kind celibate, ‘these are the good kind, the ones who seek for purity’; and one kind who could marry and whose son carries on the family temple after his death. This, Luang Por noted, entailed ‘some divergence’ from his own tradition.

Learning that the syllable ‘ko’ refers to emptiness, that evening he made it the subject of his evening talk:

\* An epithet of the Buddha.

‘Ko’ means emptiness, as in the Buddha’s term ‘temple of emptiness’ (*suññatāvihāra*). We should enter into this temple. ‘Vihāra’ means the place where the mind dwells in the perception of emptiness. The Buddha taught that this body – in fact, all things – are empty, meaning that there is no being, there is no person. Through seeing its emptiness clearly, seeing it as merely earth, water, fire and air, then Ven. Sumedho here won’t die. Why not? Because actually there’s no Sumedho. Okay? Sumedho’s death is a convention. There is no real Sumedho. There’s no Sumedho to die. He is not born and he does not die. There is just a configuration of dhammas, comprised of causes and conditions, which arises and then passes away.

The Buddha said that the Lord of Death, in other words, death itself, can’t keep up with one who dwells in the temple of emptiness. He can’t find him. There is no pleasure and no pain, no self, no separation of self and other; it’s ‘empty’. There is the seeing of emptiness in empty phenomena. The word ‘empty’ means that there is nothing at that place. It is empty with regards to the mind. There is no conceit or view whatsoever, attaching to ideas of ‘self’, of ‘us’ and ‘them’. There are simply the four elements of earth, water, fire and air arising and passing away in their natural way. That’s why the Buddha said that the Lord of Death can’t catch up, can’t find one dwelling in emptiness, and through that comes liberation. It’s called liberation from birth, liberation from old age, liberation from death.

In fact, the elements keep on being born and dying as before, but it’s simply earth, water, fire and air, coming together. There is no being, no person. The mind is empty of the concept of ‘being’, empty of the concept of ‘person’. It’s precisely *that* which is the empty place. The mind is empty in a place that is not empty. It sees the emptiness in something that is not empty: not allowing there to be a perception of a human being where one usually arises, not allowing there to be a creature where one is usually perceived, not allowing the perception of death where it would usually be perceived. That’s why the Buddha called it ‘the temple

of emptiness'. If you enter it you feel at peace, a peace free from pleasure, a peace free from pain, a peace free from birth, old age, sickness and death. That is the supreme emptiness. It's the end.

#### THE SAME FRUIT

The following day, Luang Por recorded a historic occasion:

Today was the first day that we went walking for alms in London. Ven. Bodhinyana Thera\* led the way, followed by Ven. Sumedho (American), Ven. Khemadhammo (English) and Novice Jinadatto\*\* (French). On this, our first alms-round, I received some rice, two apples, two bananas, two carrots, two sweets and a cucumber. I was happy to get this food today because of the way in which it was acquired, and because I understand alms-food to be 'Father's-food': food which, ultimately, comes to us from the Buddha.

The people of this city have never seen monks on alms-round before because most monks who've lived here have been too ashamed to practise it. I am of the exact opposite view. I only find actions that are evil or incorrect to be shameful, which is in conformity with the Buddha's meaning of the term. (That's my opinion anyway; true or false, I ask the indulgence of all the sages.)

On this same day, Khemadhammo's parents came to offer food as well and asked to listen to a talk and have a special period of meditation, which they found satisfying.

On alms-round, newspaper reporters followed in our tracks and took photographs at regular intervals, because alms-round is an unusual thing here. The people of London – children and adults – stood in lines watching us go by.

\*Luang Por's official title.

\*\*A newly arrived member of the community who went on to continue his monk's training in Wat Pah Pong.

Later in the month, Luang Por returned to Oxfordshire to teach a retreat at the meditation centre established on the grounds of the Saws' mansion. There were a hundred people on the retreat, and their dedication impressed Luang Por. He is, however, noticeably reticent about the retreat in his diary, presumably because he could find little time for writing. He summarizes only that there were 'reasonably satisfying results from the work'.

Back in London, Luang Por gave a number of evening talks, one of which he began with a now familiar reminder that doubts and uncertainties regarding the Dhamma could not be removed through study alone. The Dhamma lies beyond language. Study, being reliant on language, could only provide a superficial understanding of it. Only through practice could the wisdom necessary to penetrate the Dhamma be cultivated.

He had been asked a number of times about the difference between *samatha* and *vipassanā*. He explained that on a theoretical level, they could be distinguished, but from the point of view of Dhamma practice, they were related qualities of mind that emerged as the mind matured:

An unripe fruit is a fruit; as it ripens, it's still the same fruit; and when it's fully ripened, it remains that same fruit.

Essentially, he explained, you didn't practice *samatha* or *vipassanā*; you practiced Dhamma. By doing so, the truth of things could be known directly, independently of names. It was a natural process.

When you keep your precepts, your mind is clean; when it's clean, it's at ease; and when it's at ease, it's at peace; and when it's at peace, wisdom arises.

He spoke about the challenge in finding the Middle Way, or as he liked to call it, 'just-rightness' (*por dee*), or 'correctness'. How was it possible to know when you had achieved that optimal, just-right or correct approach most effective for realizing the goal, when you didn't know what that goal was? He said that it was necessary to have the incorrect to measure it against. The meditator proceeded by being careful not to attach to pleasure and pain. Having recognized and let go of the incorrect, correctness would arise naturally.

It's like a person with a pair of scales. If it's weighed down at this side, the buyer doesn't like it. If it's weighed down at that side, then the seller doesn't like it. Only when the scales are evenly balanced and horizontal is everyone satisfied.



When you're practising sitting meditation, you know that if you're not peaceful, if it's not 'just-right', the mind must be attached to a mental state of one kind or another.

Constant mindfulness was needed to observe the state of the mind. The mistake was in grasping on to what the mind found pleasant and rejecting what was perceived to be unpleasant. Right View could not arise, and the mind would fabricate the world it lived in as one of likes to be pursued, and dislikes to be avoided.

This is *samudaya*, the cause of suffering, because we can't live experiencing only mental pleasure or only mental pain. For the duration of our lives, the two are mixed together. And because that's so, it's essential that we understand the nature of mental pleasure and pain as they really are. If we don't understand their true nature, then we will just continue holding on to wrong views. The Buddha recognized that these two mental states are our constant enemies. As long as we don't fully understand them, we will never be liberated from suffering.

For this reason, we must develop the Buddha's Right Practice (*sammāpaṭipadā*). We need: *sīla*, taking care of our actions and speech so that they are in good order, without creating unpleasant consequences for self or others; *saṃādhi*, firm stability of attention; and *paññā*, a thorough understanding of the mass of conditioned phenomena.

Luang Por emphasized that being mindful did not refer simply to dwelling in the present moment. The Buddhist practice of *sati* was distinguished by its moral and ethical dimension.

Some meditation groups hold the view that it's not necessary to practise *sīla* or *saṃādhi*, that mindfulness in all postures is

enough. That's good in a way, but it's not the Buddha's way. A cat has mindfulness, goats and sheep have mindfulness. But it's wrong mindfulness, not *sammāsati*, Right Mindfulness. On the Buddhist path, you can't take that as a working principle. Buddhism teaches that being mindful and aware means being aware of right and wrong. Having become aware of the right and the wrong, then practice to abandon whatever is wrong and cultivate whatever is good.

#### A SUITABLE LAND

Luang Por considered England a suitable centre for the dissemination of the Buddha's teachings in the West. For him, as for most people of his age and background, the image of Britain projected around the world in its colonial heyday, was yet to fade. England seemed to be a country at the very heart of the Western world. At the same time, it was also conveniently small and easy to get around. English society seemed peaceful and stable, with no deep religious prejudices against Buddhism. Moreover, it possessed a rich history of Buddhist scholarship, most notably at the Pali Text Society\*. Above all, there was a burgeoning interest in the practice of Buddhist meditation.

As the Buddhists Luang Por met were almost all members of the educated middle class, the opinion he gained of Westerners' intellect and acuity was high. Comparing the situation with Thailand, where 'it seems like we're running out of steam', he said:

From what I've seen, the people in this country are intelligent. If you give them profound observations, they understand them easily. I have explained Dhamma to them, and they've taken away what I've said and reflected on it. I believe that the basic character of the Westerners will enable them to make Buddhism flourish here.

He saw great potential in the thoughtful, questioning attitude of the people he spoke to:

\*Founded in 1880 by T.W. Rhys Davids, 'to foster and promote the study of Pali texts'.

I've looked at the general deportment of the people here, and as yet, it's not so good; but with regard to the profound teachings, I think they'll take to it easily. In this country, it's as if the species of fruit are good, the soil's good, but there are no farmers; there's nobody to teach people here as there is in Thailand.

In my opinion, when coming over to the West, it's not necessary to say much. I'll give you a comparison. It's like you've got some fruit you want them to eat. All you have to say is that it's delicious. It might be sweet, sour, salty – you don't have to go into all that. You just say that it's delicious, and let them take it away and try it; let them find out for themselves exactly what the taste is like. That's how you have to teach Westerners. Intelligent people don't need a great deal of teaching.

With all kinds of knowledge, you have to see for yourself. You can't see something clearly just through having it explained to you. To see the truth, you must proceed until you see it for yourself. Just give them the fruit. You don't have to tell them about the flavour. They'll find out for themselves.

Luang Por seemed at ease with his inability to express himself directly to the people who came to see him. He showed no signs of impatience or frustration at the hiatuses resulting from the need for translation of his every word. But it was hard work for Ajahn Sumedho; the task of translating the Dhamma discourses was a particular challenge. When giving talks, Luang Por made no attempt to modify his mode of delivery. Rather than speaking in short bursts to prevent overtaxing the memory of the translator and the attention of his audience, Luang Por spoke in his usual manner. On occasions, a full hour would pass before he instructed Ajahn Sumedho to translate.

It was not the most effective way for Luang Por, the great communicator, to get through to his audience. In Thailand, he sometimes used Dhamma talks as a means of training his audience in patience, rather than for the transmission of information and the rousing of faith. But in England, it was hard to say to what extent that kind of intention came to play a part. It may well have been that he simply found it too difficult to transform

his unpremeditated flowing style of discourse into a series of discrete chunks. Whatever the case, many members of his audience found that his presence, his mannerisms, the sound of his voice, more than compensated for difficulties in understanding his words.

On one evening, with an argument not guaranteed to inspire his translator to further efforts, Luang Por spoke of the inferiority of language compared to direct experience. Everybody knew what water felt like, but people of different nationalities had different words for the experience.

When we human beings are experiencing the same thing, then we don't have to say so much. Just by looking at each other, we already understand each other. That's the feeling I had as I walked in here.



#### PLANTING THE LOTUS

Luang Por was satisfied with what he saw in England. Certainly, living conditions for the Sangha were far removed from those in the forest monasteries of Isan, but he had never expected it to be otherwise; developing a forest-dwelling mendicant order was obviously going to be a long-term

project. What Luang Por was looking for was a solid core of lay support and potential for future development. These, he found.

The deciding factor in his agreement to the new venture was his confidence in Ajahn Sumedho's ability to carry the burden. With the assistance of Ven. Khemadhammo and Sāmananera Jinadatto, soon to be augmented by two more North American monks trained in Wat Pah Nanachat – Vens. Anando and Viradhammo – there would, from the start, be a Sangha in residence. As four monks provided the minimum quorum needed for rituals such as the *Pāṭimokkha* recitation, this was an important constituent of the solid foundation he was seeking to establish.

Luang Por was aware of the frequent failures of temples focused upon a single charismatic figure rather than a community of monks. He was emphatic that the success of the whole venture depended on maintaining the observances that characterized the tradition in Thailand, in particular, the scrupulous adherence to the Vinaya, and the upholding of practices such as a daily alms-round. There were many ideas being bandied about in the lay community regarding which aspects of the tradition might have to be discarded. Luang Por's decision was to try to transplant the whole thing and then, through trial and error, see where adaptations might have to be made.

During a discussion about the practice of the Vinaya in England, Ajahn Sumedho mentioned to Luang Por that the governing council of one of the Asian Theravada Sanghas had recently passed a resolution permitting monks living abroad to waive the rule forbidding the use of money. Their argument had been that keeping the rule in non-Buddhist countries was impractical. Luang Por strongly disagreed. The rules governing monks' relationship to money were key to the preservation of the Vinaya as a whole. The Buddha had stipulated procedures involving lay stewards that were fit for purpose, and should be respected. An official declaration that a particular rule was no longer practical set a dangerous precedent. In fact, the difficulty in keeping some of the rules was not a bad thing at all: it prevented monks from becoming careless about the Vinaya.

We have to maintain the Vinaya in perpetuity. In the future, if monks accept money, they'll start buying and selling, and that

will be the end of it. There'll be no pure monks in Thailand or England or on the whole face of the earth. All down the drain!

It was clear that Luang Por felt strongly that relaxing the practice of any of the core training rules would lead to a slippery slope that must be resolutely avoided. But while the Vinaya and observances were to be upheld without picking and choosing according to convenience, Luang Por allowed that, in certain areas, there was room for flexibility. He was not insisting that everything had to be done in exactly the same way as it was in Thailand. Whenever he found himself in unfamiliar situations, he said, the wise monk should examine prevailing conditions and consider to what degree he might adapt to local customs without undermining his Vinaya practice:

It is intelligent to learn how to make compromises when faced with things that are not in direct conflict with the Vinaya, are not harmful in themselves, but are simply different from our own agreed ways of doing things.

Minor changes he sanctioned were prompted by the much colder climate. They included the wearing of shoes on alms-round and the covering of the right shoulder within monastic boundaries. This latter allowance led to the design of a long-sleeved shirt-cum-jacket, under which sweaters could be worn in the winter.

#### ALL IN YOUR HEAD

Although Luang Por repeatedly impressed his disciples and English hosts with the apparently effortless ease with which he adapted to conditions which were new and strange to him, the acceptance of his environment that he demonstrated was not indiscriminate. On certain occasions, when he might have been expected to conform with conditions, he showed no inclination to do so at all.

One day, for example, it was necessary for him to travel on the Underground during rush hour. The atmosphere was hurried and frantic. The monks and laypeople accompanying Luang Por felt themselves swept along by the energy of the place. They were surprised and a little irritated to see that, rather than increasing his pace to keep up with them, Luang

Por had seemed to quite deliberately slow down. One of the monks got the point: they had plenty of time to get to their destination. Why start rushing just because everyone else was?

In what areas was adaptation appropriate and to what extent? What were the causes of insufficient adaptation or over-adaptation? What was the wise relationship to customs and conventions? All these questions were of much interest to Luang Por. Observing the customs of the English allowed him to look at Thai customs with a fresh perspective. His reflections on this matter appeared in many talks that he gave on his return to Thailand. During the course of one such talk he said:

If we invest things with our views and beliefs, then they immediately gain value – they can become sacred or holy objects. But without our projections, nothing has any intrinsic worth. We Thais take the head to be the most exalted part of the body. We don't let anybody touch our heads in jest; it makes us so angry that, in the past, it has even led people to kill each other. It is because of a view that we won't let people touch our heads, a deeply entrenched attachment. When I was abroad, I saw the Westerners touching each other's heads quite freely. One of the Western monks took me to visit his parents. As soon we arrived, he put out his hand and touched his father's head affectionately. He stroked his father's head and laughed. And his father was really happy about it! To him, it meant that his son loved him. That's how it is over there.

Every culture had its conventions. Problems arose when people gave absolute and fixed values to them. Understanding conventions as conventions and making use of them as appropriate was the wise path. Luang Por said that with the abandonment of wrong views and attachment to conventions, all things lost their former value. This did not mean a moral nihilism, simply that when the blind identification with conditioned phenomena fell away, suffering could find no way into the mind.

One morning on alms-round in London, the monks became aware of a group of teenagers veering towards them. They carried with them a threat of casual violence. Laughing and joking, they shouted insults at the monks and made threatening gestures. To roars of approval from their friends, one or two of them ran up and aimed playful kicks at the line of monks, missing them by inches. They taunted the monks, probing for a response. Ajahn Sumedho began to be concerned that things were turning ugly and prepared to shield his teacher. Luang Por, completely unfazed by it all, continued walking at an unhurried pace, with eyes downcast. Soon the lads became bored with the game and ran off. On safely reaching the entrance to the temple, Ajahn Sumedho went forward to receive Luang Por's bowl. Luang Por smiled and said, 'It gives good teachings, England. Good teachings.'

#### FURTHER STILL

Luang Por had a certain basic knowledge of Christianity. At Wat Pah Pong, his Western disciples would occasionally speak about their experiences of it with him, and he sometimes enjoyed discussions with Fathers Pasec and Pisec, local French priests who were fluent in Thai. But it is unlikely that Luang Por possessed more than a fundamental idea of Christian teachings, or realized that the Protestant denominations he encountered in England were any different from the Catholicism he had met in Thailand. He certainly did not seem to be aware of how blunt his words might sound to a Christian ear. When the vicar of an old church he was visiting asked him, 'There is no prayer in your practice. Do you believe it can still take you to God?', Luang Por replied:

Beyond that.

On another occasion, Luang Por referred to a belief in gods with a saving power as a hindrance to the realization of the human potential to save oneself. To Luang Por, the preciousness of a human birth lay in the unique opportunity it provided to abandon the defilements powering the whole wheel of birth-and-death. He was critical of teachings that he saw as undermining a person's determination to take advantage of that

opportunity. Those who were unaware that there were defilements in their heart that could be removed with the right training, tended to allow life to take its course, never achieving a true refuge.

Some take refuge in a god up in heaven and just wait around for him to come and help them. In fact, we can help ourselves, it's just that we don't know how to. We wait for someone else to help us and die with nothing to show for our lives.

Buddhists should take responsibility for their lives by following the path towards being one's own refuge.

Knowing our own responsibility, we should keep abandoning defilements, abstaining from evil, doing only good, and then abandoning identification with the good.

There was no need to look for an external support. People who loved themselves, in other words, those who truly wished themselves well, should learn how to be their own refuge. Those who had practised well and gained a true inner refuge were able to create for themselves a world of experience that was full of virtue and peace. By this token, they could be said to be creator-gods themselves.

#### WHAT A WAT IS

Many of the people who came to Hampstead Vihāra had little idea of the role that a forest monastery plays in its local community. They would usually assume that monks lived in complete isolation behind high walls. Luang Por explained the truth of the matter to a university lecturer:

The forest monastery is deeply involved in the villagers' lives. It's the place where people are taught how to abandon wrong views, and how to have a correct understanding of their human birth – how to conduct themselves, how to live life. On Observance Day, the villagers gather in the monastery, offer the Sangha their daily meal and take the Eight Precepts. They practise meditation to purify their minds. The monks teach and advise them and give Dhamma talks to help them understand the principles of Buddhism.

There are people who, like you in Europe, have never heard the Buddha's teachings before. Those people are given a better understanding of the teachings. People who don't know about merit and demerit, right and wrong, are taught about them in the monastery. People from every stratum of society learn how to be intelligent about their lives: how to refrain from committing base acts of body, speech and mind, and how to establish themselves in right conduct of body, speech and mind. They learn how to reduce conceit and attachment to views and how to gradually lessen the greed, hatred and delusion in their hearts until they become true Buddhists, people who know how to share with others and how to live with loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

#### COUNTERQUESTIONS

The limits of intellectual understanding was a theme Luang Por often returned to. One evening, when a lay meditator asked him to describe the monk's life, he said it would be as difficult as a fish trying to explain its life to a bird: It would not be possible for the bird to imagine what it would be like to live in the water. Unless, he added, the bird was reborn as a fish.

When someone asked what happens after death, Luang Por extinguished the candle by the side of him and asked her in return:

*Luang Por: Where does a candle flame go after it's extinguished?*

The questioner looked confused. After a few moments, he said:

*Luang Por: Are you satisfied with my answer?*

*Questioner: No.*

*Luang Por: I wasn't satisfied with your question either.\**

\*Luang Por answered the question, 'what happens to an arahant after he dies', whereas it appears that the woman's question was, in fact, a more general one about rebirth. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that she asked, 'What happens to you after death?' (with 'you' being used idiomatically to mean 'people

At the end of June, Luang Por went to France to visit a Laotian disciple, Ajahn Bankhao. While he was there, groups of refugees from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam came to pay their respects, and he heard harrowing tales of the suffering they had endured in their homelands. During one exhortation, he said:

Give up thinking about it. Things that have passed have passed – like the days that have gone by. Don't keep grasping on to them like thorns to pierce you. Look at it as if you have been reborn. Where is your home? Now, it's right here. You have friends and family here. The place that you have left wasn't really your home. If it was, then you could still live there. In fact, we have no real home in this world. Wherever we live we simply create a convention that it is our home. But it's not really. Before long we have to move on ... So while you're here, put effort into being here. Make your life here. Make your peace with being here.

That peace came through the acceptance of change.

Wherever you are, it's just like that; there's no essence or core to it, no lasting stability. The world is continually changing. If you go back and live over there, it will change; if you stay here, it will change. We exist through change. If there was no change, we couldn't go on living. Your out-breath changes into an in-breath which changes into an out-breath. Inhalations and exhalations alternate with each other in that way, and without it we'd be dead. You can't just keep on breathing in all the time, or breathing out. We exist through change. Food is the same. You put it in one end of your body, and it comes out the other; then you eat some more. There's continual change.

Luang Por asked his audience the point of brooding on thoughts of hurt and sorrow about the unchangeable nature of change. Wherever they found themselves, they should do what needed to be done in that place.

in general') and this was mis-translated to Luang Por as, 'What happens to you after death?'

Wherever they went, they were human beings; they were Buddhists. They should reflect on the truth of their situation in order to make the best of it. Wealth and possessions come and go when conditions are ripe for them to do so. Human beings are born and die and are born again. Suffering only arises when we don't reflect on the changing nature of things.

So may all of you face up to the truth of change taught to us by the Lord Buddha. Be resilient. Wherever you find yourselves, then make that a place where you create goodness and virtue. Even if you come to the end of your life, don't abandon the goodness and virtue that comes from your Dhamma practices. Without Dhamma there is nothing truly good. '*Attā hi attano nātho*.' 'It's the self that is the refuge for the self.' Who else could be a refuge to you? That is the truth.

When conditions are ripe for things to happen, they happen. Don't spend so much time brooding over it all and causing yourself needless trouble. Put your effort into making an honest living. Do good deeds. Live harmoniously, help each other out, be kind to each other. Wherever we live, nobody stays around for very long. Soon we'll all go our separate ways.

#### FROG TO POND

After three months away from Thailand, Luang Por summarized his trip on the last page of his journal with the wordplay that had come to characterize it:

15th July, 1977

I travelled to the inner-outer land and the outer-inner land, the inner-inner land and the outer-outer land: four lands altogether. The languages that I needed to use in these lands were *nirutti*\*. And so it produced satisfactory benefit. There is no teacher for these languages; they have to be learned individually. These languages only manifest when prompted by particular events.

\*The analytical knowledge of language.

Thus, the Buddha was well-versed in all languages, and I truly saw European people as the four kinds of lotus.\*

I am a monk who has lived in the forest for a long time. I thought that going abroad would be exciting, but it was not, because I was governed by the Buddha in every posture. Not only that, but the journey also gave rise to wisdom. Just as the lotus allows no water to submerge it, my reflections constantly ran directly counter to my surroundings.

I visited various universities, and I had the thought that all the sciences of humanity are blunt: they are unable to cut off suffering, they merely generate it. I felt that, if these sciences do not rely on Buddha science, they will not survive. On the plane, I had many kinds of unusual feelings, and my mind raised up the Buddha's saying:

*Look on this world as grand as a king's chariot. Fools are enamoured of it, but the wise remain unbound.*

This saying has become even clearer, as did the phrase about not being proud when in a group whose ways and customs are unfamiliar to you. That has become absolutely clear.

Luang Por had travelled in many different vehicles over the past months. He noted that the plane he was now sitting in was flying at 30,000 feet, its maximum height above ground level. But impressive as such vehicles were, he mused, they were nothing compared to the vehicle of Dhamma. In fact, they were not so amazing at all.

The vehicles that convey people to their destinations are coarse because they merely take people who are suffering in one place off to suffer somewhere else. They just go around in endless circles.

My feeling about this trip abroad is that it's been a humorous affair. For many years now, I've felt like I was a lord of monkeys

\*The Buddha compared four levels of spiritual maturity and readiness to receive the teachings with lotuses: i) hidden in mud; ii) rising through the water; iii) emerging through the water and; iv) completely emerged.

being poked and teased by spectators. ‘What would it be like’, I thought, ‘to go abroad and try being an Ajahn Frog for a while?’ I knew I’d have to be an Ajahn Frog for sure because I didn’t know their language. And that’s how it turned out: frogs don’t know human language, but the moment they start croaking, people come running.\* For me, it was like a mute teaching the insane. And that’s not so bad. You don’t have to study or pass exams to receive the degree offered by the Buddha. And so, a mute monk established a branch monastery in London for insane people to study in. It’s comic.

## II. DUTIYAMPI: AND FOR A SECOND TIME

Two years later on the thirtieth of April, 1979, accompanied by his American attendant, Ajahn Pabbakaro, Luang Por set off to the West for a second and final time. On this trip, he was to visit America as well as Europe. But his first destination was England where the E.S.T had invited him to give encouragement to Ajahn Sumedho’s community, and to see for himself the latest developments in their efforts to establish a forest monastery.

It was an exciting time for the Sangha in England, and a pivotal one. After being based for two years – confined, some of the monks would have said – in Hampstead Vihāra, a property had been acquired in a beautiful stretch of countryside just over a hundred kilometres to the south of London. The move was to take place in June, on Luang Por’s return to England following the American leg of his journey. In the meantime, he took up residence in Hampstead Vihāra. For the first few days, he enjoyed some quiet time with the Sangha. One of the monks he met for the first time, Ajahn Sucitto, had joined the community the previous summer after some years in central Thailand. Having heard so much about Luang Por, it was finally a chance to meet him in the flesh. He was not disappointed.

“It was more the manner of the conversation than the topics that counted. He had a way of questioning an attitude I had in an affirmative way – such

\*In the Thai countryside, people catch frogs for food.

as, ‘Having to eat is really a nuisance, eh Sucitto?’ – with a big smile, that made it really easy to engage with him just by saying ‘yes’, and yet, gave you the feeling that you and he were on the same wavelength and he was affirming you. After half an hour of this, I felt tremendously uplifted and at ease. He had opened a window onto a world of joy and unfaltering response to suffering. The way out of the jungle of the mind was to stop creating it through fear and self-consciousness. The Holy Life seemed so simple and such a good and joyful way to live. It was exactly the kind of message that my anxious and tense mind needed.”

Luang Por’s reputation in England had steadily grown over the past two years. Having heard of his visit, Buddhist groups throughout the country had been in touch, inquiring as to the possibility of them receiving teachings from him. In response, Ajahn Sumedho invited Luang Por on a road trip to the north of England and Scotland, a journey during which teaching engagements could be combined with some sightseeing. Luang Por was amenable.

#### IS THAT A QUESTION?

The minibus containing Luang Por and his small entourage made their first stop in Manchester at the Samatha Society, a Theravada Buddhist meditation group. Despite the fact that his audience consisted of people committed to inner tranquillity, many of the questions put to Luang Por were of a convoluted intellectual nature that severely tested Ajahn Pabhakaro’s translation skills. One particular questioner took an excruciatingly long time to articulate a question that, in the end, was little more than a request for Luang Por to agree to his position on a certain matter. Before he’d stopped talking, a gently smiling Luang Por turned to Ajahn Pabhakaro and inquired whether the man was asking a question or giving him a Dhamma talk.

Luang Por’s replies to the questions were, for the most part, characteristically direct and pragmatic.

“When I’m afraid, I feel it in my belly; but at other times, the awareness is in the brain. Why is that?”

That's just the way it is. Love arises *here* (he points to his heart\*), and fear and fearlessness. You don't need to talk about the navel or the brain at all. Everything converges here at the heart. When there's a feeling of fear, then who's afraid? It isn't the navel, and it isn't the brain. The feeling of fear or fearlessness, the feeling of pleasure or pain, who is that? Who is the one who feels? It is *nāmadhamma*\*\*, it's the way things are. The brain and the navel are inanimate matter, there's nothing to them (*rūpadhamma*). Feelings are *nāmadhamma*, and it's their nature to be that way. If there are no causes and conditions for them to arise, they're inert; if there are causes and conditions, they spring up in the mind. That's the nature of things. So the great masters say if you feel afraid, it doesn't matter. Just say to yourself, 'It's impermanent, impermanent. Pleasure is impermanent, pain is impermanent.' Tell feelings that, and they'll soon disappear. They're changeful.

"I've read in the scriptures that Nibbāna is the cessation of suffering. In my meditation, I have experienced a state in which there is no form, the mind is vast, infinite, without suffering. I assume that it is probably not Nibbāna. What is your opinion?"

Suffering is an immaterial phenomenon; it's not a form which disappears in meditation. Suffering is a feeling that arises in the mind. We don't know what to call it, and so we have agreed on the word 'suffering'. It's a label that we have decided upon. Suffering arises, and then it passes away. The peace of mind you described is merely a calm state of mind. It's not the peace of freedom from suffering. If suffering had come to an end, then you wouldn't have this kind of doubt. There would be no doubt at all. Truly nothing left to doubt: that is the peace that comes through wisdom.

With samādhi, you're peaceful as long as you've got your eyes closed, and there are no disturbing sounds. If you get home and

\*Somewhat confusingly, it is common in Thailand to point to the chest when referring to both the physical and abstract senses of the word 'heart'.

\*\*In Buddhist texts, phenomena (*dhamma*) are often divided into two categories: the material (*rūpa*) and the immaterial (*nāma*).

sounds disturb you, then your mind's in a state of turmoil all over again. You've merely gained the peace of no disturbance, the result of samādhi, not wisdom, not the real thing. If it were the result of wisdom, there wouldn't be this kind of doubt; it would be the end of the matter.

But he could also speak in an enigmatic, 'Zen-like' style, that employed simple phrases in a way that confounded rational thought:

Suppose you're walking up and down. Walking, you're aware that you're walking. Stopping, you're aware that you're stopping. But suppose you're not walking forward or back, and you haven't stopped – what's that? Exactly where is that? How do you exist at that moment?

Now there's no more walking forward, there's no more walking back. There's nothing to doubt anymore. There's no doubt while walking forward because doubt has come to an end. There's no doubt while walking back because doubt has come to an end. There's no doubt standing still because it's all come to an end. There's no more doubt in the mind any more. This is the nature of wisdom: nothing is born in the mind.

## MANJUSRI

From Manchester, they drove further northwest to Manjusri Institute in the Lake District, a community consisting of a core of Tibetan monastics, and a larger number of Western ordained and lay practitioners. It was Luang Por's first contact with Tibetan Buddhism. He found at Manjusri a different conception of monasticism, one in which the distinction between monks and laity was more fluid than he was used to. The revelation that, in this particular lineage, monks might wear lay clothes – and even hold down a job in the local community – seemed bizarre to him.

Although it would be a short visit, Luang Por appreciated the warm welcome he received from the whole community and enjoyed the colourfulness of a tradition that was as exotic for him as it was for most inhabitants of rural northwest England. The countryside around Manjusri

was glorious, and with Luang Por obviously fascinated by the flora and fauna – so different from all that he was acquainted with in Thailand – a picnic was arranged.

After the meal, while Anāgārika Philip\* was washing Luang Por's bowl for him, Luang Por approached him, took hold of the bowl, and gave Philip lengthy and detailed instructions on the correct way to look after it. Soon Ajahn Sumedho came over to listen. Finishing his exposition, Luang Por, chuckling, said to Philip:

Ajahn Sumedho can teach you the way to Nibbāna, and I'll show you how to look after a bowl.

Later, in a session with the Manjusri community, Luang Por gave a discourse on the Four Noble Truths. He spoke humorously about the challenges that teachers face with lazy students. He said that he had asked their teacher whether it was the same here as in Thailand and had been told that it was. He talked about the foolishness of wanting things to be other than what they were, or could be, saying it was like wanting a chicken to be a duck. He said that the ordinary suffering of being alive was like the unavoidable pain of a doctor's needle entering the skin. The suffering of those who grasped on to things as self or belonging to self, on the other hand, was like that felt after being injected with poison. At one point, he spoke about dealing with anger:

Set a clock down in front of you and make a vow for the anger to disappear in two hours. See if you can do it. If anger really belonged to you, you could. But, in fact, sometimes two hours have passed and you're still angry; other times the anger's gone in an hour. If you identify with the anger as being yours, then you suffer. If anger is who you are, you should have power over it. If it doesn't follow your wishes, then it's fake. Don't believe it. Don't believe in your feelings of happiness or sadness, love or hate. They're all lying to you.

\*'Anāgārika' means 'one who has left the household life', and is equivalent to the term 'postulant' that appears earlier in the book. Philip went on to become a monk with the Pali name of Vajiro, and is currently (2017) the abbot of the branch monastery, Sumedharama, in southern Portugal.

When you get angry, is it painful or pleasurable? If it's painful, then why do you hang on to it? Why don't you throw anger away? How can you be intelligent and wise if you don't do that? You've been angry so many times in your life. Sometimes, it leads to family arguments; sometimes, you spend the whole night crying. But still you get angry, still you hold on to it in your heart. And so you go on suffering for as long as you live. This is the way *samsāra* works. If you understand suffering, then you can solve the problem. For this reason, the Buddha said that there is no skilful means to free the mind from suffering that excels seeing not-self. That's all that's needed. It's the supreme, sublime remedy.

The journey continued northwards. Edinburgh, their next stop, was the city that impressed Luang Por the most on his travels. He had already seen grand stone buildings in London and elsewhere, but he found a whole city built out of stone around the foot of a huge volcanic rock especially impressive. It filled him with admiration for the skill of the stone masons. His hosts in Edinburgh included a young woman, Kate, who was shortly to shave her head and become Sister – and later, Ajahn – Candasiri, a founding member of the nuns' order in his new monastery in southern England. During the evening question and answer session, she recalls a question on a topic that, at the time, interested her greatly:

"A professional flautist, began to ask about music: 'What about Bach? Surely there's nothing wrong with that – much of his music is very spiritual, not at all worldly.' Luang Por looked at her, and when she had finished, he said quietly, 'Yes, but the music of the peaceful heart is much, much more beautiful.' "

#### DISTURBING THE SOUND

On his return from Scotland, Luang Por took up residence at Hampstead Vihāra once more. Every evening, people came to meditate and receive teachings. The vihāra was situated upon a busy main road, and traffic noise was a constant backdrop to the evening meditation sessions. On some nights, the rumble and hum from the road was drowned out by the

sound of rock music from the pub across the way. Luang Por gave some advice on how to deal with this distraction:

Today I would like to offer you a small reflection. It concerns the view that the traffic noise is a disturbance to meditation. In fact, isn't it true that, rather than the traffic noise disturbing you, it's you that are disturbing the traffic noise?

Suffering arises through this kind of wrong view. If we think the problem is the noise, then we aim our remedies at the traffic noise or other people, instead of at the real cause. With wrong view, suffering is endless. Do you have this wrong view in your mind? Investigate this within.

Take my words away with you today and consider them: the right view is that *we* disturb the traffic noise, not that *it* disturbs us. Or more profoundly, when there is no sense of self, of traffic or of sound, then the whole business comes to an end. Look at your mind and reflect on this point.

The crucial mistake was to assume ownership of impermanent phenomena. It was the essence of wrong view.

What about if you were to sit here meditating today and pain were to appear, but there was no sense of it having an owner. How would that be? Are you close to that view or still far away? Nobody who still has the wrong understanding that pain and pleasure belong to them will find lucid calm. What is this practice for? Who is it for? Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever reflected on the matter?

Two young Englishmen who were to go on to ordain as monks and become senior members of the Western Sangha in Europe, met Luang Por for the first time during this period. The first, Philip (now Ajahn Chandapalo), had attended the Question and Answer session in Edinburgh. The second, Chris (now Ajahn Karuniko), was one of the young men who went to meditate at the Hampstead Vihāra during Luang Por's visit. He would recall:

"He used to tease people; ask people questions and tease them a little bit. So when I sat there and I was at his feet, just in awe of this wonderful man, he looked down at me and said, 'What do you think it would be like to sit there for one whole hour without one thought coming into your mind?' I thought, 'Oh, very enlightened!' But he said, 'Like a stone!' and I couldn't answer that."

Before leaving for America, Luang Por mentioned in a casual tone that it might be time for a change of leadership and that he was thinking of having Ajahn Sumedho return to Thailand with him. It was the proverbial bombshell. The renovation of the property they had acquired in the countryside, and to which they would be moving in a short two-months' time, was going to be a long, arduous task. The willingness and inspiration of the community to bear with all the hard work ahead was due in no small measure to the confidence everyone felt in Ajahn Sumedho. It was generally agreed that for him to be recalled would be a disastrous move that would throw the whole project into jeopardy. Having given everybody a good chance to look at their hopes, attachments and fears, and with the matter still unresolved, Luang Por left for America.

#### A PACIFIC STATE

The two monks arrived in Seattle, Ajahn Pabhakaro's home town, on the twenty-fifth of May. They were met at the airport by Norm and Jeanne Kappel, Ajahn Pabhakaro's parents, together with Paul Breiter (ex-Ven. Varapanyo), and a welcoming group of Seattle Buddhists.

As soon as Jeanne caught sight of her son, she rushed joyfully across the crowded concourse. Ajahn Pabhakaro almost panicked. It looked as if she was going to give him a big hug. He would be breaking one of the rules of the Discipline right in front of his teacher.\* He braced himself to repel her in the most tactful and least hurtful way. But as Jeanne got within a few feet, she sunk to her knees, and to his great relief, gave three neat bows.

\*Strictly speaking, a serious offence (*Saighādisesa*) is only committed if a monk has physical contact with a woman's body with a lustful intention. But the accepted practice of this rule in the Thai Sangha is to avoid even innocent contact.

Paul Breiter took the opportunity to offer his services as lay attendant for the duration of Luang Por's visit. When Luang Por saw that his former disciple still kept his head shaved and learned about his lifestyle, he laughed with pleasure and said that he was neither fish nor fowl, neither monk nor layman. In the coming days, he was to joke how Paul had become a special kind of transgendered person.

They stayed at the Kappel's home in the city for two or three days and then moved up to their cabin in the mountains. During this first week, Luang Por seemed exhausted and spent most of the time resting. Sometimes he would discuss Dhamma with his two disciples; on occasion, he would have them turn on the television. Completely unintelligible though the language was to him, he was interested in watching and absorbing the images of an alien way of life.

On drives around the area, Luang Por was observant of his surroundings, the culture, the customs, the behaviour and demeanour of the people he met. Sometimes, he would point people out and express how deserving of compassion they seemed to him. On one occasion, he remarked on how, 'They really like to try out everything in this society.' It seemed to Paul that he was assessing the best way to teach in America. This was confirmed when one day Luang Por started talking about Dhamma propagation. In America, he said, it wasn't necessary to use the word 'Buddhism', but to point out how the Buddhist teachings are not philosophical concepts but expressions of the truths of nature.

He observed that Westerners who were interested in Buddhism tended to be well-educated and quite opinionated. The best way to teach people like that was in such a way that they would feel like they'd come to the conclusions themselves, rather than adopting them from someone else. But he cautioned that if someone's views were so deep-seated to prevent them receiving the teachings, then not to argue with them: that would be as undignified as a millionaire arguing with someone poor and destitute. They would have to be left to their beliefs. It was their *kamma*.

Luang Por and Paul found much to talk about. Luang Por was particularly interested in the state of Buddhism in America and its future propagation. Paul, for his part, had been practising in the Zen Buddhist tradition since

his return to the West, and was eager to hear Luang Por's perspective on key Mahayana teachings. He was also curious to know Luang Por's view on providing mindful and compassionate end-of-life care for the terminally ill, a topic of great interest in Buddhist circles at that time.

"On working with the dying – which was becoming popular at the time of his visit – he said that most of the benefit was to be found by those who visited the dying, by contemplating the truths of sickness and death, rather than by those we might visit and try to help ... He said that it was unlikely that we could affect the state of mind of a dying person very much, either positively or adversely. He took his cane and poked me in the chest and said, 'If this were a red-hot iron and I was poking you with it, and then I held out a piece of candy with my other hand, how much could the candy distract you?'

"He also said that it was very difficult to know what people were experiencing at death by observing them. I told him how people described the transformations that came over the dying, how they went out smiling peacefully. He said, 'When pigs are taken to be slaughtered, they too are smiling up to the last moment. Can we say that the pigs are all going to Nibbāna?'

"He emphasized that, of course, we should treat dying people with love and compassion and look after them as best we can, but that if we don't turn it inward to contemplate our own inevitable death, there is little real benefit for us. The theme of imminent death was to be one he returned to over and over as the trip progressed."

## MAHAYANA

"He seemed to get a kick out of hearing bits of Mahayana Sutras that I would occasionally translate for him, often saying that they were expressions of deep wisdom. But sometimes he would turn them around and challenge me, reminding me not to be satisfied with conceptual knowledge. Once when I said that, according to Mahayana, the arahant has only travelled half the path, he asked, 'Has anyone ever travelled the whole path?' When I said that Sāriputta, the embodiment of wisdom in the Pali Scriptures, became the fool in many Mahayana texts, he said, 'The

people who read these things are the real fools.' Needless to say, I'm sure he wasn't denigrating the Sutras, only poking those people who merely grasp the words without experiencing the deep meaning. Talking about the Diamond Sutra, I said, 'This Sutra says, "He who sees all forms as unreal, sees the Tathāgata,"' which prompted him to look down at me very fiercely and say, 'Yeah, is that so?' More than once he asked me if I knew who wrote these Sutras. Well, they say the Buddha did. 'Do you know who Buddha is?' he demanded. I had to keep my mouth shut.

"On another occasion, I asked him once more about the Bodhisattva ideal. 'The Vimalakirti Sutra says something like, "Though beyond attachment, the Bodhisattva does not cut off the streams of passion so as to remain in the world for the benefit of sentient beings." ' Luang Por said:

That's not talking about the mind itself, but the function of the mind. It's like asking, 'Do you want this?' 'No.' 'Do you like it?' 'Yes.' 'Do you want it?' 'No.' 'Is it beautiful?' 'Yes.' 'So do you want it?' 'No.' But he *really* doesn't want it, he's not merely talking.

"When I said that the Bodhisattva concept was profound, he said, 'Don't think like that. It is your own thinking that is shallow or deep, long or short. There's not so much to it, but you get caught in your doubting mind.'

"Should we get everyone else to Nibbāna first? 'The Buddha didn't leave us after his enlightenment, but stayed to help others gain liberation. But we can do only so much and that's enough. If we save all beings in the world now, the next Buddha won't have a world to be born into.' When I asked Luang Por if he was going to return to teach in his next life, he said, 'No, I'm tired. One life of teaching is enough.' He sounded like he meant it.

"I told him that one of the ideas that some teachers gave students was that, since everything is empty, there weren't really such things as attachment and suffering. 'You can't do it that way,' Luang Por said, 'you have to use the conventions.' I said that many people contend that since the mind is inherently pure, since we all have Buddha nature, it's not necessary to practice. His answer was, 'You have something clean, like this tray. I come and drop some shit on it. Will you say, "This tray is originally clean, so I don't have to do anything to clean it now?"'

“On another occasion, I told him how some people think they’re happy, so they don’t want to practice. He said, ‘If a child won’t go to school but tells his parents, ‘It’s OK, I’m fine like this,’ is that right?’ Then there are those who say that suffering is Dharma, therefore it’s good, so we should ‘honour’ it, not try to end it. He said, ‘Right. I tell them, don’t let go of it, just hold on to it as long as you can and see what it feels like.’ He admitted that it was true that Nirvāna and samsāra are inseparable, like the palm and the back of the hand, but that one has to turn the hand over. Finally, he said that if people present all these invincible arguments and don’t want to be convinced of the truth, ‘Just let them be like that. Where will they get to?’ i.e. such people have to see it for themselves.”

#### KEEPING THE HOUSE CLEAN

It was now two years since Luang Por had become familiar with the idea of lay meditation retreats. Although he was impressed with the application of the people who attended them, he pointed out the pitfalls of a Dhamma practice focused on retreats but lacking a continuity of effort in the periods between them. Short periods of intense retreat followed by much longer periods of heedlessness could not lead to true progress. The experiences on retreat should be providing meditators with insight into the suffering inherent in heedless living, and leading them to give up unwise behaviours and live more mindfully. If retreats were not inspiring a new perspective on daily non-retreat life, then even if they gave access to some temporary, elevated states of mind, they were not effective tools for awakening. People who took this approach were not dealing with the root causes of suffering. He said it was like a thief who gets caught by the police and hires a very good lawyer to defend him. As soon as he is acquitted, he goes back to thieving. When he gets caught again, he hires the same lawyer, and the whole process repeats itself, again and again.

The goal of meditation is not just a temporary respite from suffering or a rest from the turmoil of your life. You must investigate the causes of suffering and uproot the craving that is the root of unrest in the mind. Only then will you experience true peace of mind.

He compared meditation to building a house:

You think that you practise meditation for a while and then you stop. That's not it. You must maintain constant mindfulness. Know the mental states that come and destroy your concentration and put you in a bother. Constantly know yourself. Developing concentration is not difficult; what's hard is looking after it. It doesn't take long to build a house, but maintaining the house and keeping it clean is something you have to keep doing for the rest of your life.

Consistency, continuity was all.

If you don't maintain continuity of practice, you won't see results, or only very minor ones. That's still better than nothing. But not always. Without results, some people can get bored with meditation, and start to think it's a waste of time. Other activities may come to seem more important, and they leave it behind them.

He said failure occurred because meditators were not sincere enough, and did not persevere to the point where results appear:

In fact, everything is constantly ready to teach us. All we need to do is to cultivate wisdom, and then we will clearly penetrate the truth of the world.

When someone asked him to describe how he prepared his mind for meditation, he said:

I just keep it where it always is.

On a visit to Mount Rainier, Luang Por saw snow for the first time. He was underwhelmed. It looked more beautiful in photographs, he said. More to his liking was the herbal medicine given to him by a traditional Chinese doctor in Seattle. It gave him an unexpected new burst of energy that sustained him for the rest of his journey.

## TOO MANY TEACHERS, TOO LITTLE LEARNING

Certain themes appeared in Luang Por's teachings early on and were developed throughout his time in America. He emphasized the inseparable connections between the different factors of the path, especially the relationship between outer conduct and inner cultivation. He spoke on many occasions of the importance of continuity. He cautioned against unqualified teachers. He critiqued the dilettante approach to spiritual teachings in which people cherry picked the teachings from various traditions that did not threaten the deepest attachments. He said that it was only by making a long-term commitment to the training, that a meditator developed the qualities of grit and perseverance vital to success.

Luang Por gave his first ever public address in America on the first of June at the Friends Meeting House in Seattle. Initially Paul was surprised by the subject of the talk:

"It was mostly about *sīla*. He started right out by scolding everyone in a kindly way, sort of like, 'Now you know you shouldn't be doing all these things you do.' I was a little surprised by it, and it certainly wasn't as interesting or exciting as a talk about meditation, emptiness, etc. However, as time went by and I saw him returning to this over and over, I began to appreciate it. And in the months and years to follow, I saw more and more how accurate he was. I think that was when he began telling people to be wary of meditation teachers. In subsequent talks and conversations, he went into a lot of detail on this subject. He saw a great difference between merely being able to practice meditation and giving the techniques to people on the one hand, and incorporating the practice into your whole life so that one's being is Dharma. He felt that those who were not really liberated from their cravings would naturally teach people according to their opinions and would be very indulgent with their students' habits and desires."

The one thing that I'm afraid of in this country is that there are too many meditation teachers: Tibetan, Zen, Theravadin – its chaotic! So many meditation teachers, but few people who are really meditating. I'm just afraid that you will fall foul of fake things, fake teachers. I'm very concerned about that.

He gave the example of a religious seeker in the Buddha's time:

He kept changing his teacher, constantly searching for new ones. Whenever he heard people praising a teacher, he would go to practise with him and listen to his Dhamma. Then he'd start comparing between Ajahn A and Ajahn B and Ajahn C. But the teachers' opinions did not coincide with each other, nor were they the same as his own opinion. His doubts grew and grew.

Sometime later he heard that Gotama, the great founder of a religion, was nearby. His desire to hear the teachings from a Buddha were especially strong, and he couldn't resist going to listen to him teach. After he'd paid his homage, the Buddha said to him, 'You will never put your doubts to rest through the words of another. The more you listen, the more you'll doubt. The more you listen, the more odd ideas you'll pick up. To end your doubts, all you need to do is to investigate your body and mind. Throw away thoughts of the past. Throw away thoughts of the future. They're both changeable. Look at the present moment. Look at what you're doing right now. Don't look elsewhere.'

Luang Por emphasized the point to his audience:

Wisdom has never arisen from having a lot of knowledge; it's never arisen from jumping from one meditation method to another. It is born of a heartfelt knowledge and understanding of the profundity of the guiding principles and then practising accordingly.

Someone asked:

"Zen teaches people to live naturally, but you seem to be saying the exact opposite. Would you please explain?"

I can't just teach what pleases people. Do that and they will never change. If the teacher refrains from saying those things that run counter to people's defilements, then those defilements will never disappear. Nothing will come of practice.

You feel lazy, and so you let yourself be lazy; you want to sleep, so you just let yourself sleep; you feel like working, so you do some work – that's what it would be like to live a completely natural life. The Buddha taught us to live naturally, but with a wisdom that fully comprehends nature. If that's the case, then it wouldn't be wrong.

But I'm afraid that you'd all be monkeys. You'd just allow yourself to be monkeys, and you'd never get to be human beings. When Zen teachers say these things, they are speaking wisely: they are teaching us to have the wisdom that knows the nature of nature.

Nature is Dhamma; Dhamma is nature. If you understand nature, then that's how it is. But I'm afraid people's knowledge won't reach that far. The Buddha teaches people to go against the grain: if the mind is greedy, then go against the greed in order to eliminate it; if there is anger in the mind, then go against the anger in order to eliminate it; if there is delusion in the mind, then go against it in order to eliminate delusion.

#### DON'T LET THE THIEF IN

Luang Por had always presented the path of practice as one demanding an integrated approach in which the trainings of conduct, of the heart and of wisdom, as laid down by the Buddha, were to be seen as inseparable parts of one whole. In America, he found something rather different. A new eclectic Buddhism was emerging, one characterized by the quest for a distinctly American Dhamma suited to the prevailing society and culture, and without any necessary adherence to traditional Asian forms (often referred to as 'baggage'). The talk was of extracting the essence of all the different Buddhist traditions that had found their way to America. Luang Por's concern was, firstly, whether the leaders of the Buddhist community were up to such a profound task, and secondly, that in a pick and mix approach, the organic relationship between practices fundamental to the Eightfold Path could easily be overlooked. Furthermore, adopting only those elements of the tradition that conformed to a non-Buddhist society's current views and values risked narrowing the tradition, or even distorting it.

Luang Por was particularly concerned to point out the vital connection between the practice of *sīla* and the more profound levels of inner cultivation. He arrived in America with a reputation as a great meditation master, and it was not only Paul who was surprised by how much time he devoted to talking about *sīla*. He asserted that when people committed themselves to meditation practices without a commensurable effort to purify their actions and speech, no lasting benefit would ensue. This was not the Thai Theravada view of things, he said, it was the law of nature. *Sīla* was the indispensable foundation of practice. It was the fundamental tool needed to build a noble life. It was the quality that made a human being a fitting vessel for the Dhamma.

Take what I have said away with you and think about it. Breaking any of the precepts has consequences. Reflect on this well. Meditate on the precepts. If you clearly see the consequences of transgressing the precepts, you will be able to abandon transgression.

Most of the questions he received about individual precepts centred on the third one, dealing with sexual misconduct, and the fifth one, with the consumption of alcohol and drugs.

He explained that the third precept is intended to prevent splits and turmoil over sexual matters and to promote moderation, ‘just-rightness’. Sexual promiscuity creates unrest: ‘It’s not Dhamma practice, and it is not the Middle Way.’

Whatever practitioners do, they should have boundaries, a frame for their actions, honesty and sincerity towards each other.

He summarized that celibacy was most conducive to progress in Dhamma. Those unable or unwilling to lead a celibate life should cultivate contentment with their partner. For a moderate lifestyle that supported the practice of Dhamma, one sexual partner was more than sufficient.

Transgression of the fifth precept did not require intoxication: any amount of alcohol or drugs was sufficient. Luang Por said that you did not need to be drunk before alcohol undermined your sense of right and wrong. The consumption of alcohol, even in so-called ‘moderation’, created the conditions for suffering to arise. Heedlessness was like a thief

always ready to steal your good qualities. Why would you want to give a thief even the smallest opportunity to run off with your most valued possessions?

If you knew someone was a thief, would it be a good idea to let him into your house?

Luang Por's manner was noticeably different in the West. He was almost comically polite to his audience. He apologized (unthinkable in Thailand) when he said anything even slightly controversial. It was an approach that might have simply been the expression of a natural reticence in a new land, but it is hard to imagine – experienced rhetorician that he was – that Luang Por was unaware of how charming and lovable, and therefore persuasive, it made him appear.

Today I've given you some things to reflect on. And I'd like to ask your forgiveness. Today I've talked a lot. I've talked a lot because of a love of the Dhamma. I've never been to America before, you know. Now that I'm here, I'm going to leave a lot of good things for you to reflect on. If they're wrong, please don't blame me, blame the Buddha. He was the one who sent me and made me say these things.



I'd like to ask your forgiveness for the Dhamma teachings today. Sometimes I'm not aware of the weight of my words. I've given various perspectives which might differ from the customs in this country, and so I ask your pardon. I want there to be goodness and nobility. If you practise Dhamma, then I want you to know the true flavour of the Dhamma in your hearts. So I would like to really thank you all for coming to listen today and ask your forgiveness for everything.

It was over the top (was he teasing them? some wondered), but irresistible.

As a predominantly Protestant country since its inception, America, unlike Europe, has few historical associations with monasticism, and little sympathy with it. One of the topics on Buddhist lips at the time of Luang Por's visit was the likelihood of American Buddhism developing as a predominantly lay-based tradition, and of that being a strength rather than a weakness.

It is hard to say to what extent Luang Por's comments were prompted by knowledge of this debate, but he did speak on a number of occasions of the importance of the monastic vocation. After a screening of the BBC documentary, *The Mindful Way*, filmed in Wat Pah Pong, he was asked the question, 'Is it possible for householders to practise as well as monks?'

The most convenient way to practise is as a monastic because monastics are celibate. They're free to come and go, they have no family. Householders can practise, but the path is a roundabout one, there are bends in the road. It's hard because you have a spouse, children, all kinds of things to see to. A householder can practise, but it's a little bit indirect.

More tongue in cheek perhaps, was the salutary effect he suggested an increased monastic presence might have on overpopulation. The world was already in a turmoil because there were too many people in it. As they struggled for meagre resources, violence and killing was rife. If more people adopted the celibate life, they would be helping to reduce the number of new people coming into it.

On a more serious note, he said that, in his opinion, monastics make the best teachers. They need make no compromises with the Dhamma. Untrammelled by family responsibilities, they make a fulltime commitment. Having very few personal needs or distractions, they are able to give themselves whole-heartedly to teaching the Dhamma to themselves and others. Not needing to make a livelihood from teaching, they are not easily led into diluting or distorting the teachings or catering to their audience.

This view encountered a certain amount of scepticism from members of his audience, some of whom were disciples of married clergy in the Zen and Tibetan traditions. He said that the responsibility of each practitioner was to reach the stage of certainty where there was no longer any need to rely on an external guide. But in the meantime, he was suggesting caution rather than prejudice. And in important matters, was it not wiser to exercise caution than to dispense with it?

## VANCOUVER

Luang Por spent the sixth of June in Vancouver, meeting with members of the Thai community during the day and teaching in the evening at the University of British Columbia. The program was organized by Ajahn Tiradhammo, a Canadian disciple of Luang Por, who had arranged for his visit to his family in British Columbia to coincide with Luang Por's trip.

At the university, Luang Por led an audience, containing only a minority of serious meditators, in a one hour meditation session. For most of his audience, it was a far longer period than they had ever sat before. Adding to the challenge was the fact that Luang Por had given no prior indication of how long the meditation would last. It was one of the unpredictable 'let-go-and-watch-your-mind-or-else-suffer-and-want-to-die' experiences with which the monks were all too familiar. Luang Por had perhaps decided to give his audience the opportunity to investigate expectation, discomfort, boredom, aversion, doubt and attachment to timetables: the Dhamma teaching before the Dhamma talk. How many appreciated the gift was hard to tell.

Luang Por had perceived a pervasive fear of death in Western society. It was not so much that this fear was absent in Thailand, but in the West it appeared more extreme. Seeing elderly people adopting youthful styles of dress and behaviour, as if they were proclaiming, 'I'm not old!' confirmed him in this view. In his Dhamma talk at the university, he spoke about the inevitability of death. Of course, medical research was a good thing, he said, but if people didn't die of one illness, they would die of another. Death would never be brought to an end by such means. Only by following the path of the Buddha could the sufferings of birth and death be completely transcended.

He said that it was important that everyone investigate this matter of birth, old age, sickness and death. It was a cause of laughter and celebration when a baby was born, and tears when the same person eventually died. In fact, he said, the two were inseparable. One inevitably led to the other. With a smile that softened his words, he said:

If you're really going to cry, do it at the birth: 'Here comes another one. Another one to die.'

Being willing to look at life with open eyes could show the importance of the practices of Dhamma. Paul summarized:

"The bottom line, he said, was to give up everything for Dharma. 'What does everyone love most of all? Their own life. We can sacrifice everything for life; if we can give our life for Dharma, there will be no problem for us.'"

Luang Por, responding to the university setting, spoke on the topic of worldly versus spiritual knowledge:

These days there are so many fields of knowledge, so many '-ologies' – too many to count – and they don't concede much to each other, do they? I have many Western disciples who've been to university. It made them even more foolish. It made them suffer even more, made them even more contentious than they were before they went, because they weren't familiar with the owner of their knowledge [themselves]. These sciences are all fine, but they must converge in Buddha science. If they don't, then they're of no real benefit. There's no integration, there's still jealousy and competition and continual turmoil. But if they can unite within the boundaries of *sīla*, then they become Buddha science.

Buddha science encompasses all the humanities and sciences. It doesn't allow them to go awry or to cause problems. When Buddha science encompasses all fields of knowledge, keeping them within the framework of *sīla*, then everyone becomes like siblings, free of jealousy and malice. If you study some field of

knowledge, are proficient in it and merge it with Buddha science, then you are called a Buddhist. Wherever you go, you're serene.

On the two nights that he gave teachings in Vancouver, people followed Luang Por back to the rented apartment where he was staying. He spoke to them until almost midnight. After they left, he continued speaking to his attendants until three in the morning. For Paul, these were memorable nights:

“The Chinese medicine was clearly doing something for him. Not only was he extremely energetic, but those late sessions were some of the most incredible Dharma I ever heard from him. For much of the time, he had his eyes half closed, and he wasn’t talking to anyone in particular; it was more like he was revealing his stream of awareness ...

“He said, ‘We talk about things to be developed and things to give up, but there’s nothing to develop, nothing to give up.’ The way he spoke, it wasn’t exactly clear whether he was referring to himself or just generally speaking about the viewpoint of ultimate truth, but he certainly seemed to know what he was talking about. He mentioned the arahant, and said, ‘The arahant is really different from ordinary people’ – then he coyly added, ‘Of course, we don’t see arahants nowadays, but I’m going by what it says in the books’ – and he said that the things that seem true or valuable to us are false and worthless to an arahant. Trying to interest an arahant in worldly things would be like offering lead in exchange for gold. We think, here is a whole pile of lead, why wouldn’t he want to trade his piece of gold which is so much smaller? ...

“There was incredible energy emanating from Luang Por on those nights. We were aching from sitting so long, and Ajahn Pabhakaro and Ajahn Tiradhammo would start nodding off in their chairs until Luang Por would rouse us with something hilariously funny. He talked about religion in the West and said, ‘People here follow Christianity – Santa Claus! He dresses up in his suit, the kids sit on his lap, and he says, “What would you like?”’ And he did a pantomime of Santa that left us in stitches.”

On the ninth of June, back in Seattle, Luang Por took his meal at the house of a Thai family. Afterwards, he spoke about the decline in the Thai Sangha. In what Paul would call his ‘faux-grumbling’ mode, Luang Por spoke of how men were becoming monks to maintain the custom more than to get any real value from the time spent in the robes. It was not like in the old days when people would spend at least three years as monks. The owner of the house had been away from Thailand long enough to have no qualms about openly expressing his disagreement. He said:

“Suppose that every Thai man was to become a monk for four or five years – nothing would ever get done. If everyone became monks, there would be nobody doing any work in the country. That’s how I see it.”

Luang Por chuckled. To laughs all round, he said that was how earth-worms thought. He quoted an old folk story that the reason worms excrete the earth that they’ve just eaten is because they are afraid that otherwise there would soon be none left. Of course, it was impossible that worms could digest all the earth in the world. The idea that encouraging people to spend longer in robes was going to destroy the economy was equally unrealistic. It just wasn’t going to happen.

You couldn’t even get everyone to be a monk for seven or fifteen days. Some people become monks for all their life, some for five or six years, some for six or seven days. It’s natural for it to be like that.

On returning to the Kappel house, Luang Por sat talking to Paul, and the conversation turned to a friend of his who had been coming to listen to Luang Por’s teachings.

“Catherine had told me that she felt that Luang Por’s teaching was true, but it was impossible to practice it in this society. He replied that people use similar arguments in Thailand, ‘I’m young so I don’t have the opportunity to practice, but when I’m old I’ll practice.’ Luang Por asked, ‘Would you say, “I’m young so I don’t have time to eat, when I get older I’ll eat?”’ Again, he poked me with his cane and said, ‘If this were on fire, would you

say, “I’m suffering, it’s true, but since I live in this society I can’t get away from it? ...”

“I mentioned that Catherine’s husband liked to go rock climbing, and she felt that it was like a meditation practice for him. Luang Por asked, ‘When he climbs on the rocks does he see the Four Noble Truths?’ I said that I didn’t know, though perhaps he didn’t. Then I said that sometimes I thought that when someone does a worldly activity with full attention, there can be deep concentration; for example, a musician might have factors of *jhāna* present when he plays, such as one-pointedness, rapture, and so on, except that it was in an unskilful way. Luang Por just said, ‘No! Nobody plays music and enters *jhāna* – only Westerners! You people don’t know about *jhāna* ...’

“He asked me about Zen once more, so I recited the Heart Sutra\* for him, doing the best I could with a spontaneous translation. When I finished he said, ‘No emptiness either ... No Bodhisattva ...’ He asked me where the sutra came from, and I said it was reputed to have been spoken by Buddha. ‘No Buddha.’ Then he said, ‘This is talking about deep wisdom, beyond all conventions. But it doesn’t mean that we should ignore the conventions. How could we teach without them? We have to use names for things, isn’t that so?’ ”

#### INSIGHT MEDITATION SOCIETY

On the tenth of June, Luang Por, Ajahn Pabhakaro and Paul flew to New York en route to the Insight Meditation Society (I.M.S.), a retreat centre in Barre, Massachusetts. They were travelling there at the invitation of one of the centre’s founders, Jack Kornfield, who had spent some months as a monk in Wat Pah Pong a few years before. As they began their journey, Paul found that Luang Por was still having severe difficulties with North American geography. Was Massachusetts also in the United States, he asked; what about Boston, was that in New York?

\* A seminal text of Mahayana Buddhism in which all the key teachings of the Theravada Buddhist tradition are negated in order to illuminate the meaning of emptiness.



Luang Por stayed at I.M.S. for eight days and taught at a retreat attended by around seventy meditators. In the mornings, Luang Por would spend time with the staff – mostly old students of the centre – giving them the opportunity to ask questions. In the afternoon, he would conduct a question and answer session with the retreatants, and in the evening, he would lead a meditation session and give a discourse. Paul, who was helping with the translation remembered:

“For his morning sessions with the staff, he quickly established the theme of facing the executioner. When people came in he would ask, ‘Did you do your homework today?’ He told them they should think about death at least three times in a day: once in the morning, afternoon and evening. ‘Don’t be like Po’ (that’s what he’d started calling me – it’s the Thai corruption of the Pali ‘bodhi’, i.e. enlightenment, and commonly used as a name), he’d say. ‘He just walks around, he looks at the trees and the birds, he eats his lunch; he never thinks that he’s going to die someday.’ I became the straight man for him, and would sometimes prompt him with questions. The idea of death is usually remote, I once told him. If I felt some danger, it might be more real. ‘Don’t you see the danger?’ he said. ‘Every breath.’ I said that I usually felt that, for me, death was far in the

future. I was destined to live a long time, 100 years or more. ‘That’s the wisdom of Devadatta\*’, he replied.”

During the retreat, he emphasized the Four Noble Truths and the guiding principles of practice. He answered many questions about meditation:

On the level of access concentration, you can compare the mind to a chicken imprisoned in its coop. It’s still walking around. It’s not motionless, it’s not asleep, it’s not dead. But it has a limit to its movements that is in your control. Once the mind is pacified, then investigate the body. Investigate the thirty-two parts of the body. If your mind is still agitated, then keep your eye on the thoughts and emotions that your mind fabricates; see them for what they are: impermanent, impersonal without any abiding selfhood. In practice, it’s not necessary to know a lot of things, but merely to maintain awareness right at this point until there arises a sense of disenchantment and dispassion. Then you will let go of attachment to the five hindrances, and it is that which is the goal of meditation.

There was a question about the five aggregates:

“Do the five aggregates have any effect on peace? Is meditation practice the basis for understanding the five hindrances?”

With wisdom, the five aggregates will help you to be liberated. If you are foolish, then they will cause you suffering. If you’re foolish, you can say they are like thieves who rob you. But if you understand their true nature, they can make you enlightened. It’s like you don’t know Ajahn Chah. You’ve just heard his name and seen his picture; it’s still not enough. But today you’ve met him and spoken with him which means that you know one part of him. If you realize the Dhamma that he’s taught you, then you would know all of him.

\*The Buddha’s evil cousin who thought his best interests lie in creating a schism in the Sangha, but as a result of his efforts, fell into the deepest of hell realms. ‘The wisdom of Devadatta’ is thus shorthand for foolishness of the most abject variety.

On the second day of the retreat, Luang Por made a suggestion:

Listening to the Dhamma in a large group is difficult. A large pot of curry doesn't taste so delicious. There are too many things mixed together, not enough to go around; it doesn't taste so good. A small pot of curry is more delicious. It would be better to divide into smaller groups for discussion.

So from that day onwards, the retreatants were divided into five discussion groups of about fifteen people each so that everyone would have a chance to ask Luang Por questions more conveniently. To a query on the goal of practice, he replied:

We come here to practise in order that we won't have to practise in the future. We're born in order not to be born again. We do this, so we won't have to do it again ... We practise so that the mind may disengage from sensuality and suffering, in order that there will be no more suffering in future.

Paul observed:

"In the group interviews, Luang Por generally gave direct and simple answers to complicated questions. He told people to put the books away, to rely on themselves, to have determination and perseverance."

Many problems didn't require a lot of thinking. All that was required was the patience to bear with the unpleasant until conditions revealed themselves as impermanent and empty.

"People would continually talk about the difficulties they faced as lay practitioners. He said that it was difficult to practice as a householder; it's like trying to meditate in prison. You sit down and begin, and the prison officer comes and shouts, 'Get up! March over there!'"

Luang Por returned to a familiar theme: Dhamma practice as eliminating the underlying cause of suffering, rather than juggling the symptoms. He reprised a favourite simile:

It's like you go for a walk and you trip over a stump, so you get a hatchet and cut it off at ground level. But it grows back and you trip over it again, so you cut it off again. But it keeps on growing back. This goes on and on. You'd be better off getting a tractor and ploughing it up.

He pointed to the inherent conflict in wishing fervently to be free of the suffering that arises from indulgence in defilement, without having to let go of the defilement itself. Some people couldn't bear to lose the pleasure they derived from the defilement; others claimed that it was impossible to let go. And yet, they still hoped for a solution. He said it was like sitting on an anthill. The ants are biting, you're feeling uncomfortable, but you refuse to get up and move somewhere else.

Or you come to the teacher holding something burning hot in your hand, and you complain, 'Ajahn, this is hot!' The teacher says, 'So put it down.' And you say, 'I can't put it down, but I don't want it to be hot!' So what can the teacher do for you?

Meditators could spend their whole life going back and forth with themselves, trying to find what exactly they needed to do to let go of the defilements. It was like contemplating a journey.

You ask yourself, 'Should I go today? Should I? Maybe I'll go tomorrow.' Then the next day, 'Should I go? Should I or shouldn't I?' And you keep on doing this day after day until you die, and you never go anywhere. You've got to think, 'Go!', and be done with it.

Successful translation depends upon the audience being confident that the translator is accurately representing the words of the speaker. Luang Por's mischievousness appeared while Jack Kornfield was translating for him. Jack remembers him saying:

Even though I don't speak any English, I know the truth is that my translator leaves out all the really hard things I say. I tell you painful things, and he leaves out all the things that have a sting in them, makes them soft and gentle for you. You can't trust him.

When asked questions about the state of the world, Luang Por would encourage the questioner to focus on the world of direct experience, rather than the one that could be read about in newspapers:

You're asking about the world. Do you know what the world is?  
It's just the senses and their objects and the ignorance that grasps  
at them.

Personal experience was the only way to verify the teachings. When asked about enlightenment, he said that it was like the taste of a banana. You had to put it in your mouth before you could know the taste. Every now and then, Paul would get a spontaneous personal teaching:

“One afternoon when the session was over, I was unplugging my tape recorder and I touched the metal prong of the plug while it was still connected. I got a shock and dropped it immediately. Luang Por noticed, and he said, ‘Oh! How come you could let go of that so easily? Who told you to?’ It was a good illustration of what he was trying to teach.

“Finally, he told people that they were always welcome to come to his monastery and stay for a while. ‘Wat Pah Pong is like a factory’, he said. ‘After the product is finished, it can be sent out into the world.’ But it’s easier to train people if they’re far from their home. ‘Po ran away,’ he said. ‘If I were younger, I’d drag him back by his ear.’”

Following the retreat, Luang Por met with the Korean Zen master, Seung Sahn Soen Sa Nim. They both seemed to greatly enjoy the meeting. Paul remembered Luang Por being particularly taken with one of his new friend’s stories:

“A Zen monk sneaks into a lecture hall where some great scholar is talking about One Mind. ‘All things come from the One Mind,’ the scholar teaches, at which the Zen monk comes forth and challenges him. ‘You say all things come from the One Mind. OK. So now tell me, where does the One Mind come from?’ When the preacher was unable to answer, the monk beat him. Luang Por laughed and said, ‘He deserved a beating, all right.’ Afterwards, he repeated this several times, laughing and saying what a good story that was, ‘He couldn’t answer where the One Mind comes from, so he really deserved a beating.’”

After a couple of days with the Buddhist community at the appropriately named Anicca Farm, Luang Por flew back to England.

#### A RURAL SECLUSION

On the twenty-second of June, shortly after Luang Por arrived, and two years since they first moved in, the Sangha finally left Hampstead Vihāra. Their destination was a ninety-minute car journey away, on the outskirts of the small village of Chithurst in the county of Sussex. It was there that stood a hundred acres of woodland, now formally offered to the Sangha. But southern England was not Thailand: strict laws prevented the monks from simply building huts amongst the trees as they saw fit. Instead, they were to move into a crumbling Victorian manor house nearby, purchased for them by the E.S.T.

Before joining the Sangha at Chithurst House (the soon-to-be renamed Cittaviveka Forest Monastery), Luang Por returned to Oakenholt in Oxfordshire. There he attended the Ordination ceremony of a young Englishman who was entering into the Burmese Sangha with the highly respected master, Mahasi Sayadaw, as his preceptor. The occasion afforded a telling glimpse of the difference between Asian and European sensibilities. For many of the English guests brought up in a non-Buddhist culture, the contrast between the two renowned Theravada monks – the engaging Luang Por (seen as ‘warm’) and the undemonstrative Sayadaw (seen as ‘cold’)\* – was startling. Luang Por seemed more inspiring. It was clear that in a non-Buddhist country where the arahant ideal was not firmly established\*\*, the personality of the teacher was much more vital to the arising of faith than it was in a traditional Buddhist nation. It seemed that people were much less likely to ask themselves, ‘Would I like to be as wise as him?’ as they were to ask, ‘Would I like to be that kind of person?’

\*This was not, of course, a unanimous perception. One American Buddhist meditator described the feeling he experienced in the Burmese master’s presence as being ‘like falling snow’.

\*\*The personalities of arahants vary widely. They may be introverted or extroverted, urbane or gruff, outwardly warm or cool. This is widely recognized in Buddhist circles in Southeast Asia.

Luang Por arrived in Chithurst to see the first tangible fruit of the decision he had made to allow his monks to come to the West and the advice he had given. The gifting of the woodland had been a vindication of his insistence that, while in London, the monks maintain their practice of alms-round, even if they received no food in their bowls. He had explained that alms-round is not only about gathering food, but also about being seen. Alms-round provides an occasion in which monastics, simply through their appearance and deportment, may inspire those who see them to try to find out more about the Dhamma. Over the years, Luang Por had often recounted the story of how Ven. Assaji was first seen by a wandering ascetic who would go on to seek out the Buddha and eventually become the great disciple, Ven. Sāriputta.

In the present case, it was not a wandering ascetic, but Paul James, a jogger on Hampstead Heath, who became inspired and followed the monks back to the temple. Some months later, after getting to know and trust Ajahn Sumedho and his fellow monks, Paul revealed to them a non-spiritual problem that he was struggling with. He had received an area of woodland, Hammer Wood, as an inheritance, with the condition that he neither sold it nor cut down the trees. The forest had become a financial burden on him, and he was looking to donate it to an appropriate charitable body. Would the Sangha be interested?

When George Sharp drove down to West Sussex to see the forest for himself, he found Hammer Wood to be an idyllic spot. Not only that, but as if hidden benevolent forces were at work, just a short walk away from the wood, stood a large semi-derelict Victorian house, for sale at a cut-down price. In an imperfect world, it was as near ideal as could be hoped for. Fearful that the house would be sold before he could convene a meeting of the Trust, George agreed on a price for it that very day. It was an audacious gamble given that the funds would have to be raised by selling Hampstead Vihāra.

A number of people excluded from this momentous decision were left disgruntled, one of whom arrived some months later in Wat Pah Pong. He painted for Luang Por a black picture of events. According to him, the move was rash, premature and involved an irresponsible use of funds. Luang Por had listened impassively and reserved judgement.

It was true that the present state of Chithurst House posed considerable challenges to potential inhabitants. Ajahn Sucitto later described the conditions that awaited them there.

“The owner had let the place run to seed: uncleared gutters had broken and spilled water over the walls so that dry rot had spread. As things had broken down, they had been abandoned; when we moved in, only four of the twenty or so rooms were still in use. The electricity had blown, the roof leaked, the floors were rotten and there was only one cold-water tap for washing. The house was full of junk, all kinds of bric-a-brac from pre-war days. The outbuildings were crumbling, roofs stoved in by fallen trees. The cesspit had not been emptied for twenty-five years. The gardens were overgrown: a fine walled fruit garden was a chest-high sea of nettles. Over thirty abandoned cars protruded through the brambles that smothered the vicinity of the old coach-house.”

Luang Por recognized that Chithurst House would require months, probably years, of hard work to renovate. But there was nothing wrong with that. Forest monks had always been accustomed to long, hard work when building their monasteries. The enjoyment he took in his visit can be seen clearly in the BBC documentary shot while he was there. *The Buddha Comes to Sussex* includes priceless footage of a beaming Luang Por conversing with English vicars and expounding on the Dhamma with the aid of a large apple.

Ajahn Amaro arrived the following year from Thailand. He was unfazed by the work ahead, confident that the training he had received from Luang Por had fully prepared him for it.

“It was not seen as a great imposition on our practice. It was just simply, ‘Well, we practise with this.’ You wear your boiler suit, you put your pack of dry rot fluid on your back, and you climb into your chimney with your spray gun and you meditate ... And you see that Luang Por’s concern with our ability to adapt and to develop the right attitude to whatever situation was occurring was far more important than having precise conditions for formal meditation practice. It was making the quality of adaptation the most important thing: the readiness to live in peace with the world, rather than getting the world to fit your idea of what peace is.”

### III. THE LAST NIGHT

On the evening of the twenty-seventh of June, his last night at Chithurst before returning to Thailand, Luang Por met with the Sangha for an evening of conversation and exhortation. The tape recording made that night captures wonderfully the warmth and informality of the occasion. ‘Monks’ and ‘zestful’ are two words not commonly linked in one sentence, but the conviviality, punctuated by gales of laughter, is tangible. It was the old magic of Luang Por, making people feel by his presence that they’d never in their lives been so happy and contented. He also took the opportunity to show off his only English phrase. Just a few sentences into a more formal Dhamma talk, a layperson entered the room with a new tray of hot drinks.

Here we go again. Another *kappati*\*.

In the Dhamma talk that night, he gave his disciples encouragement and support in their propagation of the Dhamma. He said:

If you make an effort to teach people, you teach yourself at the same time. You become smarter; you reflect more.

Investigating the self-doubts and fears that arose when one first started to teach was part of the benefit to the teacher.

If you’re meditating, if you’re mindful, then teaching others is teaching yourself. Then there’s no harm in it.

As for the subject of talks, he advised:

Giving, morality, heaven, the drawbacks of sensuality, the benefits of renunciation\*\* – however many talks you may give, always keep them within the bounds of those topics. Their source is *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. Throughout your life of teaching, never stray from these topics.

He advised against too much eclecticism. There needed to be a coherent ‘house style’.

\* A Pali word from the mealtime blessing. Luang Por’s mnemonic for ‘a cup of tea’.

\*\* The five factors of the *anupubbikathā* or ‘graduated discourse’.

If you're teaching mindfulness of breathing, all of you should teach it in the same way. Similarly, with the investigation of the body. Don't introduce teachings from other traditions – it's confusing. One person starts teaching Zen, and another Tibetan Buddhism, and it's a complete muddle. People here are very confused already. If you give them a bit of this and a bit of that, it will be such a muddle that, before long, they won't absorb anything at all. You must all teach in a common idiom so that there will be a harmony of approach. If students master the basic practice, then they will understand other traditions by themselves. But if you teach a lot of different traditions, then they won't grasp the underlying principles.

He warned against sectarianism. Monks should not fall into the trap of comparing traditions or praising their own path at the expense of others.

Tell people that they don't have to abandon their former practices, they can hold on to them. But for now give this a try. Just do this one thing for the time being and see what happens.

#### DON'T ANSWER THE PHONE

Luang Por reminded the monks that even the Buddha said that teaching was difficult. People do not relinquish their delusions easily. He cautioned them not to get discouraged and gave an example from his own experience:

Sometimes you get fed up with it. At the beginning, oh! Sometimes I'd lay there in the middle of the night and feel like taking my bowl and running away from my disciples. It was all so frustrating! But when I reflected on the Dhamma, I realized that I couldn't do that. I asked myself, 'If you're not going to teach deluded people, who are you going to teach?' ... I was the one who was deluded, deluded into thinking I was special.

A telephone rang in another room, which nobody wanted to answer. Ajahn Pabhakaro asked, 'Wouldn't it be better to be a Pacceka-buddha\*?'

\* A silent Buddha, one who does not teach others.

It would be good. The Paccekabuddha has no suffering ... But it's best not to be anything at all. It's hard work being a Buddha. And don't be a Paccekabuddha either. As soon as you 'are' something, then it gets difficult. Don't be anything at all. If you think you are Ven. Sumedho or Ven. Anando, then you'll suffer. Right now, there's no Anando and there's no Sumedho. Eh, how can that be? Well, those names are just conventions, aren't they? The moment that you *become* them, then you suffer. If there's a Sumedho, then Sumedho gets angry. If there's an Anando, then Anando gets angry. If there's no Sumedho or Anando, then there's nobody - nobody to answer the phone.

Answering or not answering the telephone became a metaphor for the response to sense impingement.

Ring! Ring! Ring! You couldn't care less. Nothing happens. There's no suffering. But if you *are* somebody, then as soon as the phone rings you go to pick it up. It's suffering. You've got to use wisdom to get rid of Sumedho. Don't let there be any Anando to pick up the phone. Don't be Sumedho. Don't be Anando. Use those words only as conventions. Don't take things on board. People may call you good or bad, but don't identify with those qualities. Don't identify with things but be aware. And when you're aware, do you take things on? No. That's the end.

## EARTHQUAKES

In the course of their conversation, Ajahn Sumedho referred to various predictions that the next few years were likely to see a number of major earthquakes and other natural disasters. He said that people who were overly dependent on modern technology attached to the comforts that they provided, and without any inner refuge, were likely to suffer greatly. Luang Por replied:

The Buddha taught us to look at the present. Astrologers say something's going to happen in another two years, but we don't have to wait that long. It's too far away. How could it be two years? It's happening right now. Can't you see? Three years

before an earthquake? There's an earthquake right now. Look. America's shaking really strongly. You think certain things, and this earth shakes [he points at his chest]. We don't see it. The external earthquakes are rare – I've never seen one in my life. But in *this* earth, there are tremors every day, every minute. As soon as we're born, we start wailing. There, that's an earthquake.

Luang Por said that because each person's earth quaked just a small amount every day, it was overlooked. Movement was natural and inevitable. It was a good thing. If there was no change, then people would stay as babies when they were born and nobody would grow up. If nobody got old and died, where would everybody live? The problem, he said, was that people didn't look at the nature of things, and so nobody wanted to die:

It's like you don't want this glass to be full, but you keep steadily pouring water into it.

When all was said and done, there was only one way to be free from death:

When you see with wisdom that nothing is truly me or mine, you realize the Deathless.

## Luang Por

You were a fountain  
of cool stream water  
in the square of a dusty town,  
and you were the source of that stream,  
on a high, unseen peak.

You were, Luang Por, that mountain itself,  
unmoved,  
but variously seen.

Luang Por, you were never one person,  
you were always the same.

You were the child laughing  
at the Emperor's new clothes, and ours.

You were a demand to be awake,  
the mirror of our faults, ruthlessly kind.

Luang Por, you were the essence of our texts,  
the leader of our practice,  
the proof of its results.

You were a blazing bonfire  
on a windy, bone-chilled night:  
How we miss you!

Luang Por, you were the sturdy stone bridge,  
we had dreamed of.

You were at ease  
in the present  
as if it were your own ancestral land.

Luang Por,  
you were the bright full moon  
that we sometimes obscured with clouds.

You were ironwood, you were banyan, and you were bodhi:  
'Pormae-khoobaajhn.'

Luang Por, you were a freshly dripping lotus  
in a world of plastic flowers.

Not once did you lead us astray.

You were a lighthouse for our flimsy rafts  
on the heaving sea.

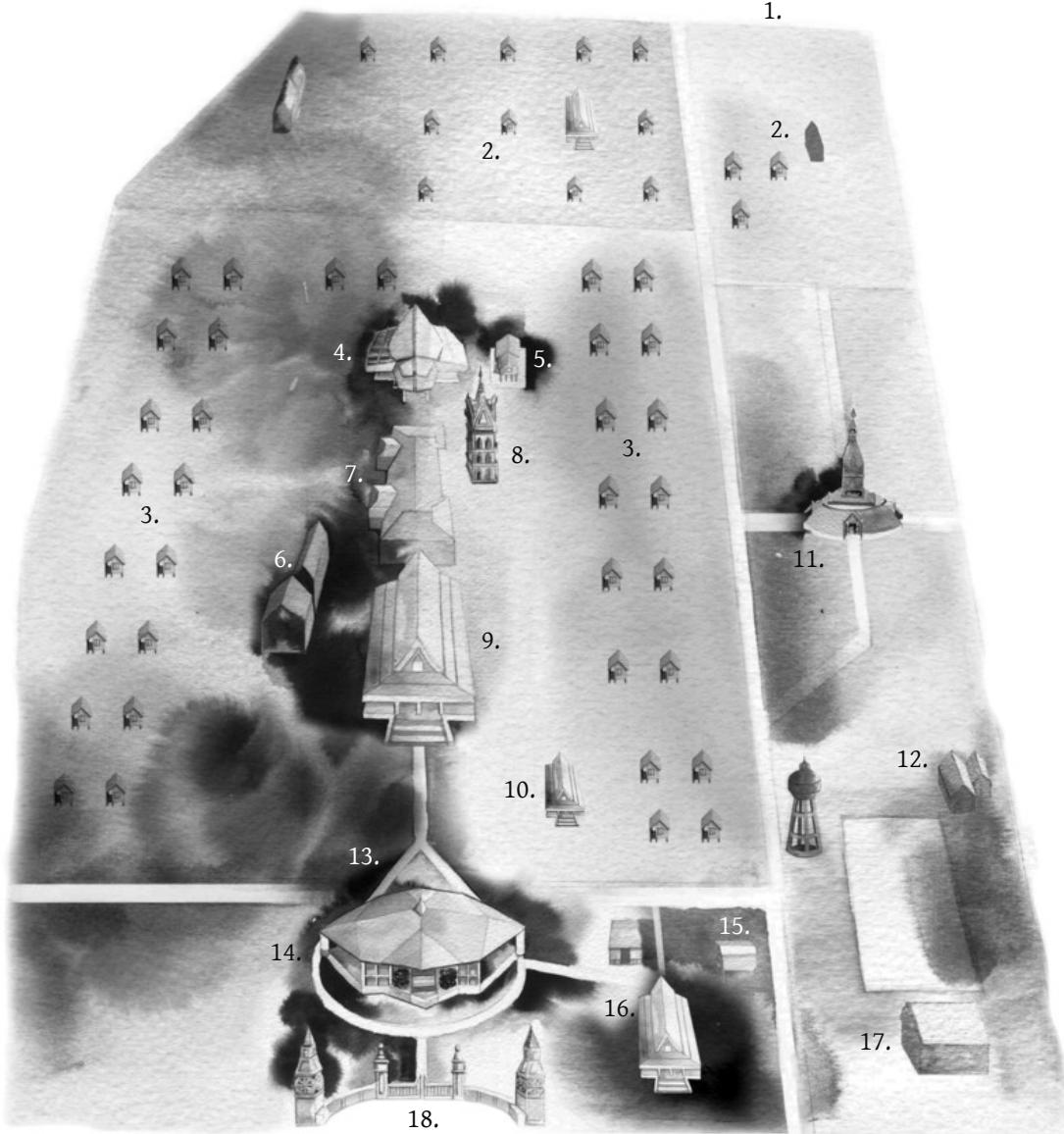
Luang Por,  
you are beyond my words of praise and all description.  
Humbly, I place my head  
beneath your feet.

W5=904  
June, 1995



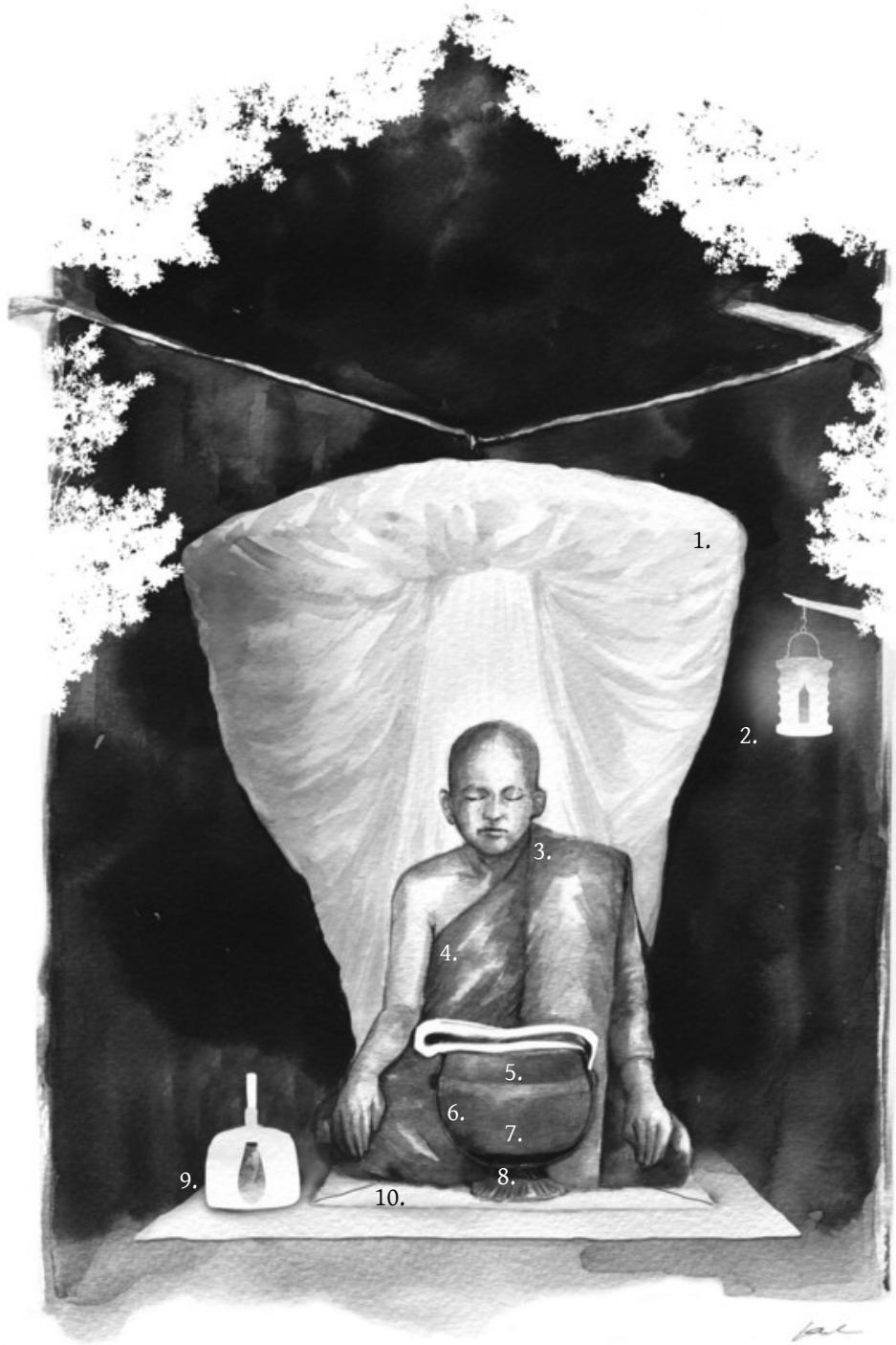
# *Appendix I*

## *Illustrations*



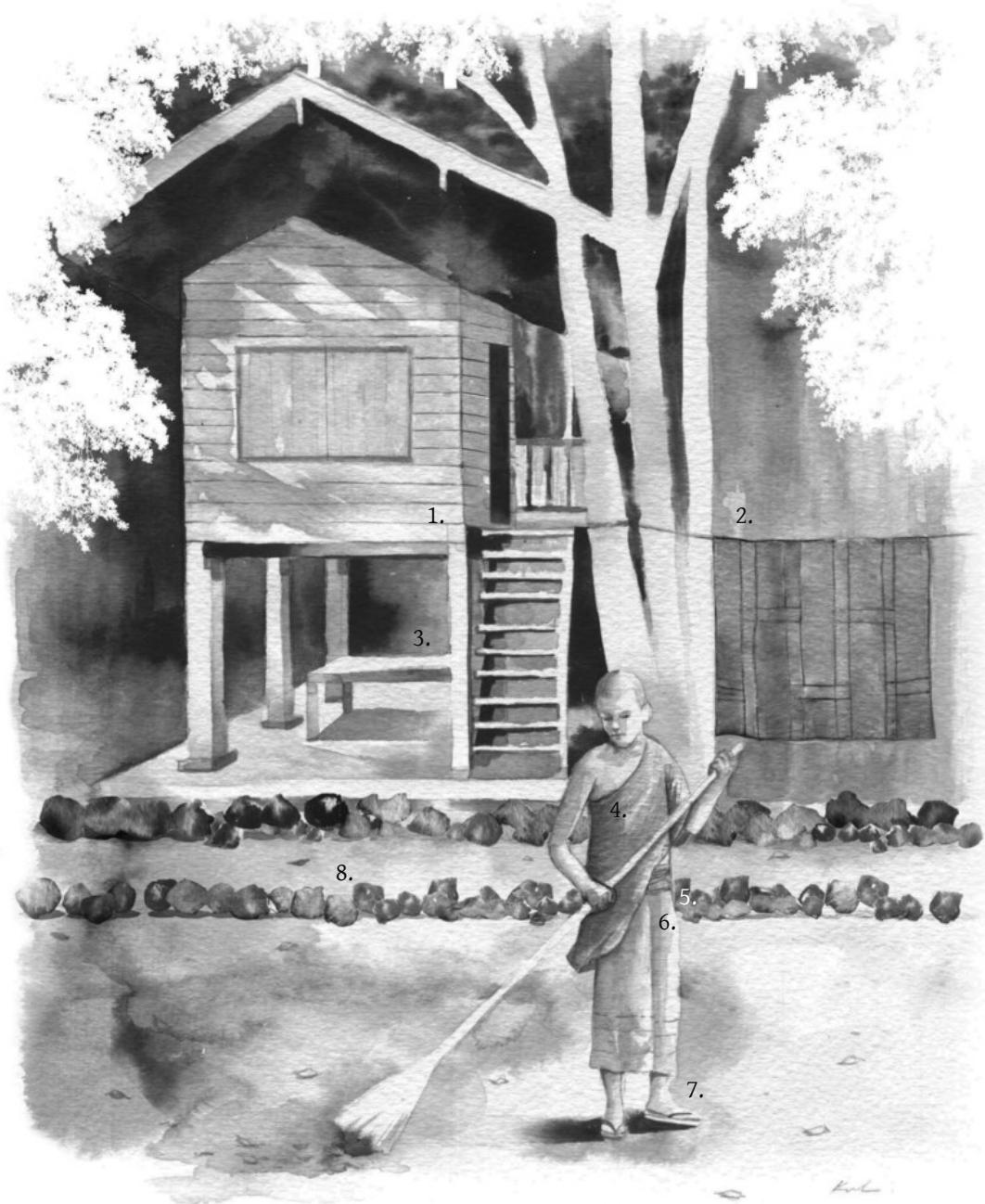
*Wat Pah Pong*

1. the monastery wall,
2. the Maechee Section,
3. monk's kuties,
4. the Uposatha Hall,
5. Luang Por's kuti,
6. the kitchen,
7. the dining hall,
8. the bell tower,
9. the Dhamma Hall,
10. the sewing kuti,
11. the stupa,
12. the Nursing Kuti,
13. the inner (original) gate,
14. the Luang Por Chah museum,
15. the Abbot's Kutি,
16. the Outer Sala,
17. the dyeing shed,
18. outer gate



A forest monk's robes and requisites

1. glot, 2. candle lantern, 3. outer robe (*saṅghāṭī*), 4. upper robe (*uttarāsaṅga*), 5. bowl lid,  
6. crocheted bowl cover, 7. alms-bowl, 8. bowl stand, 9. water kettle, 10. sitting cloth

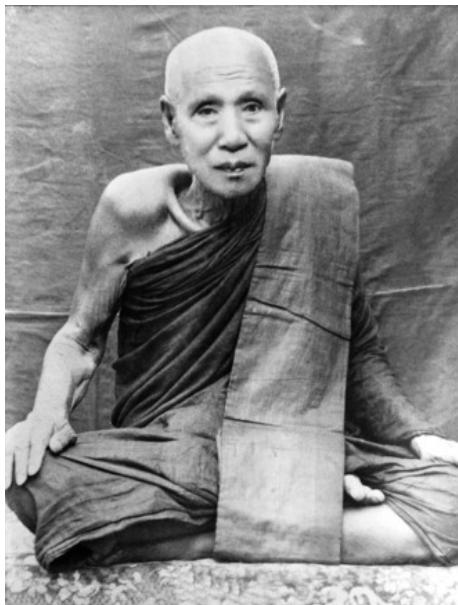


*A forest monk's dwelling*

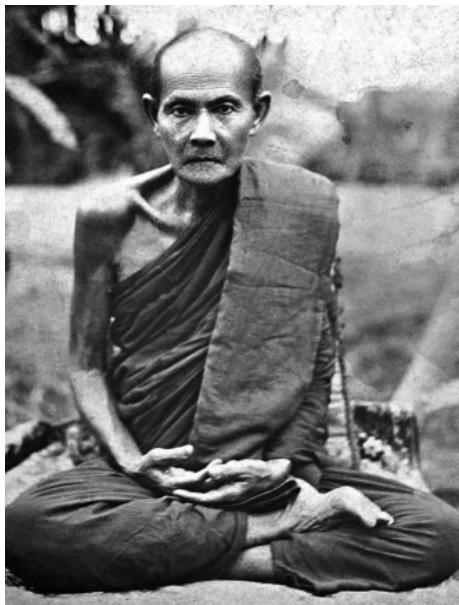
1. kuti/hut, 2. clothes line, 3. sitting platform, 4. angsa, 5. waistband, 6. lower robe (antaravāsaka), 7. flip-flops, 8. walking meditation path

## *Appendix II*

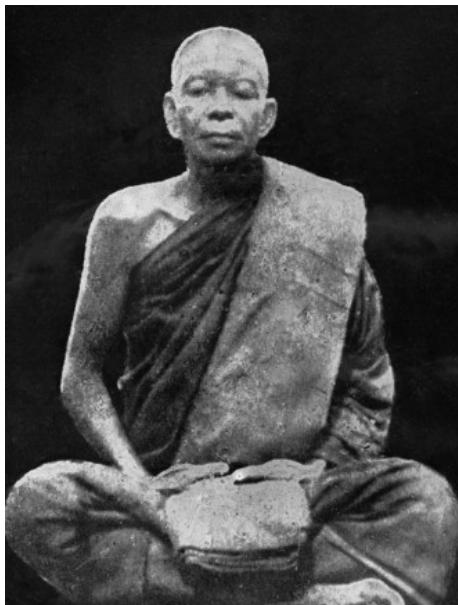
### *Photographs*



Luang Pu Sao Kantasilo (1861-1941)



Luang Pu Mun Bhuridatto (1870-1949)



Luang Pu Tongrat Kantasilo (1888-1956)



Luang Pu Kinaree Candiyo (1896-1980)



A Kathina Ceremony Dhamma discourse.



Luang Por Chah's Kuti 1964-1981 (photograph taken after later renovation).



Luang Por Chah returns to Ubon after receiving the title of Chao Khun from the King of Thailand on the fifth of December, 1973. See page 184.



The Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Mr Ranasinghe Premadasa, comes to pay respects to Luang Por on the sixteenth of June, 1988.



Luang Por with his mother Maechee Pim Chuangchot shortly before her death in 1976.



Construction of the road to Wat Tam Saeng Pet. See page 429.



Monks mixing cement for the Luang Por Chah stupa in 1992.



Their Majesties King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit pay respects to Luang Por on the day of his cremation, the sixteenth of January, 1993.



Luang Por's body is carried in procession from the Wat Pah Pong Dhamma Hall to the stupa in preparation for cremation.

# Appendix III

## Thai Transliteration

### **Titles:**

Luang Pu	หลวงปู่
Luang Ta	หลวงตา
Luang Por	หลวงพ่อ
Ajahn	อาจารย์
Tan	ท่าน
maechee	แม่ชี
Por	พ่อ
Mae	แม่

### **Specific People:**

Luang Pu Mun	หลวงปู่มั่น
Luang Pu Tongrat	หลวงปู่ทองรัตน์
Luang Pu Kinaree	หลวงปู่กินรี
Luang Ta Maha Bua	หลวงตามหาบัว
Luang Por Chah	หลวงพ่อชา
Ajahn Liem	อาจารย์เลิ่ม
Maechee Boonyu	แม่ชีบุญย์
Pimwong	พิมพ์วงศ์

### **Miscellaneous:**

angsa	อังশะ
sabong	สับง
sanghati	สังฆาติ
khaoma cloth	ผ้าขาวม้า
kratop	กระต็อบ
glot	กลด
borapet	บอร์เพ็ค
samor	สมอ
makhampom	มะขามป้อม

### **Concepts:**

Upalamani	อุปัลมาṇī
Nak Tam	นักธรรม
anjali	อัญชลี
papiap	พับเพียบ
Wan Phra	วันพระ
khrop khrua	ครอ卜ครัว
pindapat	บินทาต
prot sat	โปรดสัตว์
tudong	ธุดงค์
toraman	ธรรมาน
sop arom	สอบารมณ์
mun kor khae	มันกีแค่
nun lae	นั่นแหละ
took tong	ถูกต้อง
pordee	พอดี
poo roo	ผู้รู้
pee	ผี
salot sangwet	สลดสังเวช
raksa	รักษา
ot ton	อดทน
ploi wang	ปล่อยวาง

### **Places:**

Wat Nong Pah Pong	วัดหนองป่าพง
Wat Pah Nanachat	วัดป้านานชาติ
Wat Tam Saeng Pet	วัดถ้ำแสงเพชร
Bahn Kor	บ้านก่อ
Bahn Nong Hee	บ้านหนองฮี

# Glossary

**Abhidhamma** (Pali) A reworking and systematization of the core principles presented in the Sutta Piṭaka.

**āgantuka monk** (Pali) Literally: ‘visiting monk’. In the *Thai Forest Tradition*, this refers both to monks in a monastery on short-term stays, and those serving a period of probation with a view to becoming fully fledged members of the resident community.

**Ajahn** (Thai) From the Pali ‘ācariya’. Literally: ‘teacher’. Used as a title for senior monks or nuns of more than ten years’ seniority in a monastery.

**Ajahn Liem Thitadhammo** (1941- ) Abbot of *Wat Pah Pong*.

**Ajahn Sumedho** (1934- ) Ordination: 1967. The most senior Western disciple of Luang Por Chah. In 1975, he established *Wat Pah Nanachat* (the International Forest Monastery) near *Wat Pah Pong*, and in 1977, he accepted the invitation to begin the first overseas branch monastery in Hampstead, England.

**alms-round** (Pali: *pindapāta*; Thai: *pindapat*) The means by which mendicant monks receive food for their daily meal. Walking through an inhabited area with eyes downcast, monks and novices accept offerings from any donors along their path. They are forbidden from begging for food.

**anattā** (Pali) Literally: ‘not-self’. The Buddha’s foundational insight that there is no permanent agent or self that lies behind or within experience. Anattā is one of the *three characteristics of existence* – along with impermanence (*anicca*) and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*).

**angsā** (Thai) A rectangular cloth draped over a monk’s left shoulder and fastened with a tag under the right arm. *See: Appendix I*

**anicca** (Pali) Impermanence: one of the *three characteristics of existence* along with not-self (*anattā*) and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*).

**anjali** (Pali: *añjali* / Thai) A traditional gesture of joining the palms in front of oneself with fingertips pointing upward as a means of expressing respect. This gesture is still prevalent in Buddhist countries and India today.

**apaññaka dhammas** (Pali) A set of three ‘always relevant’ virtues that were a favourite basis for Luang Por’s Dhamma talks to the Sangha consisting of: 1) sense-restraint (*indriya-saṃvara*), 2) moderation in eating (*bhojane mattaññutā*), and 3) devotion to wakefulness (*jāgar-iyānuyoga*).

**appanāsamādhi** (Pali) Full or ‘fixed’ concentration’. The level of *samādhi* experienced during absorption (*jhāna*).

**arahant** (Pali) Literally: a ‘Worthy One’. One who has attained the fourth and highest level of enlightenment – the culmination of the Buddha’s training – through penetration of the *Four Noble Truths* and the abandonment of all mental fetters. Such an enlightened being will never be reborn again. A title for the Buddha himself and for the highest level of his noble disciples.

**ārāma** (Pali; Thai: *wat*) This word, originally referring to parks and pleasure groves, was adopted by the Buddha and used to refer to a monastic residence.

**Ariya Sangha** (Pali) Literally: ‘noble assembly’. The ‘Sangha’ in the highest sense: the group of noble beings, ordained and lay, who have attained at least the first stage of enlightenment.

**bhāvanā** (Pali) Cultivation. The Pali word most often translated as ‘meditation’ or ‘mental development’. In fact, the meaning of bhāvanā extends beyond the application of a meditation technique and may be applied to all elements of the *Eightfold Path*.

**bhikkhu** (Pali) A fully ordained Buddhist monk. A male over the age of twenty who has taken higher Ordination (*upasampadā*) to become a member of the Bhikkhu Sangha.

**bhikkhunī** (Pali) A fully ordained Buddhist nun. A female practitioner who has taken higher Ordination (*upasampadā*) to become a member of the Bhikkhunī Sangha.

**bodhisattva** (Sanskrit) A being striving for Awakening. In the Theravada tradition, this term is used solely to describe the Buddha from the moment that he made his vow to become a Buddha until his enlightenment.

**bojjhangā** (Pali) *See:* seven enlightenment factors

**borapet** (Thai) *Tinospora crispa*. Heart-shaped moonseed or guduchi. An extremely bitter vine used as a prophylactic and treatment for malaria.

**brahman** (Pali) A member of the priestly caste in Hinduism; one who practices Brahmanism.

**Buddha** Literally: ‘Awakened One’. Historically, this term refers to the fifth-century BCE Indian prince, Siddhattha Gotama, who attained enlightenment through his own striving and taught the path to others. He was not the first Buddha. A long line of Buddhas stretches back into the unimaginably distant past.

**Buddhaghosa** A fifth-century CE Indian Theravada monk who, while living in Sri Lanka, composed the *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*) and voluminous commentaries to every major section of the *Pali Canon*. His exegeses have come to form the foundation for the orthodox understanding of Theravada doctrine.

**Buddho** (Pali) A variation on ‘Buddha’. In Thailand, it is explained as: ‘The one who knows; the one who is awake; the one who is radiant’. ‘Buddho’ is also widely taught and used as a meditation mantra, often being combined with the breath: internally reciting ‘BUD’ on the inhalation, and ‘-DHO’ on the exhalation.

**Chao Khun** (Thai) An ecclesiastic title bestowed upon a monk by the King of Thailand.

**citta** (Pali) The mind, heart, consciousness, state of consciousness.

**cremation forest** Traditionally, throughout Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, an area outside of a village devoted to the open-air cremation of corpses. Dwelling in such forests was praised by the Buddha and has been encouraged by teachers in the *Thai Forest Tradition*, including Luang Por Chah. Cremation forests inspire heedfulness and diligence in ardent practitioners.

**dāna** (Pali) The meritorious act of giving.

**defilement** (Pali: *kilesa*) Mental qualities which obscure the radiance of the citta. The three root defilements are greed, hatred and delusion. These manifest in various ways including passion, malevolence, anger, rancour, hypocrisy, arrogance, envy, miserliness, dishonesty, boastfulness, obstinacy, pride, conceit and complacency.

**dekwat** (Thai) Literally: ‘monastery child’. A boy or teenager living in a monastery.

**Dependent Origination** (Pali: *paticcasamuppāda*) The Buddha’s analysis of conditionality, *Dependent Origination* traces how ignorance leads to suffering and, in turn, how insight leads to its cessation.

**determine (a robe)** (Pali: *adhiṭṭhāna*) A formal declaration – by means of a short ritual – that certain requisites belong to and are under a monk’s care. The Vinaya requires that all cloth requisites as well as bowls be ‘determined’.

**deva** (Pali) Literally: ‘shining one’ – an inhabitant of one the heavenly realms, sometimes translated as ‘god’ or ‘angel’.

**Devadatta** A psychically gifted cousin of the Buddha who tried to create a schism in the Sangha.

**Dhamma** (Pali) 1) The truth of the way things are, and the path leading to the realization of that truth. 2) The teachings of the Buddha based upon these natural laws and summarized in the *Four Noble Truths*.

**dhamma** (Pali) 1) A phenomenon in and of itself. 2) A mental state.

**Dhamma Hall** Usually the largest building in a monastery, it is here where Dhamma discourses are delivered, and where sessions of

group meditation and chanting take place. It may also function as the dining hall where no such designated building exists.

**Dhammapada** (Pali) Literally: ‘Verses of Dhamma’. The most widely known and popular collection of teachings from the *Pali Canon*, containing verses grouped by topic.

**Dhamma seat** (Thai: *tamaht*) A large, raised wooden chair in a Dhamma Hall from which monks deliver formal discourses.

**Dhamma-Vinaya** (Pali) Literally: ‘Doctrine and Discipline’. One of the names the Buddha gave to his dispensation.

**Dhammadayut nikāya** (Pali) Literally: ‘the order bound with Dhamma’ or ‘the righteous order’). The more recent of the two major sects of the Thai monastic Sangha. The Dhammadayut Order was established by King Mongkut in the 1830s, during his period in the monkhood prior to ascending the throne, and with the intention of being a regenerative force within the *Mahā* (*great or greater*) *nikāya*.

**dhutaṅga** (Pali) (Thai: *tudong*) Literally: ‘to wear away’. Voluntary ascetic practices, made allowable by the Buddha, that practitioners may undertake from time to time or as a long-term commitment in order to cultivate renunciation and contentment, and to stir up energy. Thirteen such practices are identified in the commentaries: 1) using only patched-up robes, 2) using only one set of three robes, 3) going for alms, 4) not-passing-by any donors on one’s alms-round, 5) eating no more than one meal a day, 6) eating only from the alms-bowl, 7) refusing any food offered after the alms-round, 8) living in the forest, 9) living under a tree, 10) living under the open sky, 11) living in a cremation forest, 12) being content with whatever dwelling one has, and 13) not lying down.

**Discipline** See: *Vinaya*

**Discourses** See: *Sutta Piṭaka*

**dukkha** (Pali) The quality of unsatisfactoriness, suffering, inherent stress and dis-ease in all conditioned phenomena. One of the *three characteristics* of existence along with not-self (*anattā*) and impermanence (*anicca*).

**Eight Precepts** These precepts consist of refraining from: 1) killing, 2) stealing, 3) all sexual activity, 4) lying, 5) the use of intoxicants, 6) eating after midday, 7) entertainment, beautification and adornment, and 8) using a high or luxurious bed. These training rules are commonly adopted by lay Buddhists on Observance Days and are also referred to as the ‘Eight Upāsikā (laywoman) / Upāsakā (layman) Precepts’.

**Eightfold Path** (Pali: *atthaṅgiko maggo*) The fourth of the *Four Noble Truths*, also known as the ‘Noble Eightfold Path’, is the way of practice described by the Buddha leading to the cessation of suffering. It consists of: 1) Right View, 2) Right Intention, 3) Right Speech, 4) Right Action, 5) Right Livelihood, 6) Right Effort, 7) Right Mindfulness, and 8) Right Concentration.

**faith** (Pali/Thai: *saddhā*) Conviction, confidence, trust. A confidence in the teachings of the Buddha that issues in the willingness to put them to the test. Conviction becomes unshakeable upon the attainment of *stream-entry*.

**farang** (Thai) The Thai word for Caucasians.

**fetters** (Pali: ‘*saṃyojana*’) A group of ten defilements that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth. The realization of the four stages of enlightenment is explained in terms of the progressive abandonment of fetters. These are as follow: 1) self-identification views, 2) uncertainty, 3) grasping at precepts and practices, 4) sensual passion, 5) aversion, 6) passion for form, 7) passion for formless phenomena, 8) conceit, 9) restlessness, and 10) unawareness.

**five basic meditation topics** (Pali: *mūlakammaṭṭhāna* – Literally: ‘root bases of work’) Five objects of meditation given during the Ordination ceremony, namely: 1) hair of the head (*kesā*), 2) hair of the body (*lomā*), 3) nails (*nakhā*), 4) teeth (*dantā*), and 5) skin (*taco*). Meditation on these parts of the body (the first five of the *thirty-two parts of the body*) is meant to engender disenchantment with, and non-attachment towards, the body.

**five hindrances** (Pali: *nīvaraṇa*) A frequently occurring canonical list of five major hindrances to meditation: 1) sensual desire, 2) ill

will, 3) sloth and torpor, 4) restlessness and anxiety, and 5) doubt, vacillation.

**Five Precepts** (Pali: *pañcasilāni*) Refraining from: 1) killing, 2) stealing, 3) sexual misconduct, 4) lying, and 5) the use of intoxicants. The Five Precepts constitute the fundamental objects for mindfulness in daily life.

**five spiritual powers/faculties** (Pali: *bala/indriya*) 1) faith (*saddhā*), 2) effort (*viriya*), 3) mindfulness (*sati*), 4) concentration (*saṃādhi*), and 5) wisdom (*paññā*).

**foundations of mindfulness** (Pali: *satipaṭṭhāna*) Four foundations for establishing mindfulness – body, feelings, mind, and mental events – viewed in and of themselves as they occur.

**Four Noble Truths** The distinctive, foundational and all-encompassing teaching of the Buddha: 1) suffering (in all its physical and mental manifestations), 2) its origin (i.e. craving for sensuality, becoming, or not becoming), 3) its cessation, and 4) the path leading towards its cessation (the *Eightfold Path*). Full comprehension of suffering, the abandonment of its cause, and the realization of its cessation through full development of the Path is equivalent to the attainment of *Nibbāna*.

**Four requisites** (Pali: *paccaya, nissaya*) A frequently occurring canonical list of the four necessities or supports for life: 1) clothing, 2) food, 3) shelter, and 4) medicine. For monks, the most basic examples of these requisites are: 1) rag-robies, 2) alms-food, 3) shelter at the root of a tree, and 4) fermented urine for medicine.

**four roads to success** (Pali: *iddhipāda* – Literally: ‘bases for spiritual power’ or ‘pathways to spiritual success’) Four pathways to success: 1) zeal (*chanda*), 2) effort (*viriya*), 3) application of mind (*citta*), and 4) investigation (*vimamsā*).

**glot** (Thai) A glot is a handmade umbrella with a hook on top, which is suspended from a line strung between two trees. A cylindrical mosquito net is hung from the umbrella creating a make-shift tent.

**Going Forth** (Pali: *pabbajā*) Novice ordination. During the ceremony, the postulant requests to ‘go forth from home to homelessness’, formally takes refuge in the *Triple Gem*, undertakes the *Ten Precepts* and asks to live in dependence upon his teacher who will instruct him in the *five basic meditation topics*.

**hiri** (Pali) A wise and healthy shame towards performing evil actions; an inner conscience that restrains one from doing deeds that would jeopardize their own self-respect. Often paired with wise fear of the consequences of evil actions (*ottappa*).

**Holy Life** (Pali: *brahmacariyā*) The most commonly used English word for the celibate monastic life.

**Isan** 1) Northeast Thailand. The birthplace of the majority of teachers in what is now known as the *Thai Forest Tradition*. 2) The main language spoken in this region; a dialect of the Lao language.

**Isan Forest Tradition** Synonymous with the *Thai Forest Tradition*.

**Jātaka** (Pali) A collection of over 520 verses dealing with the Buddha’s past lives and the stories based upon them. These form the basis for much of the popular Buddhism in Theravada cultures.

**jhāna** (Pali) Mental absorption. Eight successively more refined states of strong concentration.

**kalyāṇamitta** (Pali) Literally: ‘good and noble friend’. The Buddhist ideal of a spiritual friend and teacher.

**kāma** (Pali) An object of sensual desire as well as the sensual desire and lust itself. The term is not confined solely to sexual passion but includes the desire for any object of the senses.

**kamma** (Pali; Sanskrit: ‘*karma*’) Volitional action as expressed through body, speech, and mind.

**Kaṭhina** (Pali) A ceremony, held in the fourth month of the rainy season (October, sometimes November), in which a Sangha of monks receives offerings of cloth from lay supporters, makes a robe from the cloth and offers it to one of its members considered to be a

fitting recipient. In Thailand, the annual kāṭhina ceremony has also become the major occasion for offering financial support to monasteries.

**Khandhakas** (Pali) One of the three main divisions (along with the *Suttavibhaṅga* and the *Parivāra*) of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the *Khandhakas* serve to detail the communal life of the Sangha and thus include: procedures for formal meetings (including the *Ordination* and *Uposatha* ceremonies); steps to be taken in dealing with disputes; descriptions of observances relating to the four requisites – robes, alms-food, dwelling place and medicines; and an elaboration of the fourteen protocols (*kiccavatta*).

**khandhas** (Pali) Literally: ‘heaps; groups; aggregates’. The physical and mental components of experience, which act as the bases of attachment (*upādāna*) and thus an illusory sense of self, namely: 1) form (*rūpa*), 2) feeling (*vedanā*), 3) perception (*saññā*), 4) mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), and 5) consciousness (*viññāna*).

**khaṇikasamādhi** (Pali) Literally: ‘momentary concentration’. The initial, short-lived intervals of calm experienced as the mind becomes focused on its object. This level of concentration arises before access concentration (*upacārasamādhi*) and full concentration (*appanāsamādhi*).

**khaoma cloth** (Thai) An all-purpose piece of cloth used by Thai males, it measures approximately two metres by one and is usually covered in a bright checkered pattern. It is used as a sarong, a bathing cloth, a towel, a shawl, a turban, a carrying cloth and even as a hammock.

**kiccavatta** (Pali) Literally: ‘duty observances’. Protocols. A group of fourteen protocols found in the *Khandhakas* (Vin Cv 8) that play an important part in the Vinaya training at Wat Pah Pong and its branch monasteries.

**kusala** (Pali) Wholesome, skillful, good, meritorious.

**kuti** (Pali: ‘*kuṭī*’) A single-person dwelling place for a Buddhist monastic; kutis range in size from small huts to more substantial lodgings. In Thai forest monasteries, a typical kuti will have a single room with

a small veranda and will be raised from one to two metres above ground level. This serves a dual purpose of giving protection from flooding and encroachment by forest animals – large and small – while at the same time, creating a second open-sided living space below it.

**loving-kindness** (Pali: *mettā*) The wish for all beings to be happy; the first of the four sublime abodes (*brahmavihāra*); and the ninth of the ten perfections (*pāramī*).

**lower robe** (Pali: *antaravāsaka*; Thai: *sabong*) A monk's skirt-like lower robe which is held in place by a cloth waistband. One of a monk's three main robes. *See: Appendix I*

**Luang Por** (Thai) Literally: 'Venerable Father'. A term of address for senior monks that is both affectionate and respectful.

**Luang Pu** (Thai) Literally: 'Venerable Paternal-Grandfather'. A term of address for elderly senior monks that is both affectionate and respectful.

**Luang Pu Mun Bhuridatta** (1870-1949) The greatest monk of his generation. The co-founder (with Luang Pu Sao) of the *Thai Forest Tradition*. He was well known for emphasizing strict adherence to the *Vinaya*, regular observance of the *dhutāṅgas*, and intensive meditation practice. Luang Por Chah considered Luang Pu Mun his primary teacher.

**Luang Ta** (Thai) Literally: 'Venerable Maternal Grandfather'. Traditionally used to refer to a monk who ordains later in life after having lived the householder life.

**maechee** (Thai) A white-robed nun who formally takes the *Eight Precepts* at her ordination. At *Wat Pah Pong*, maechees are expected to keep many of the same ascetic practices and monastic regulations as the monks, in order to maximise the supporting conditions for their practice.

**Mahānikāya** (Pali) Literally: 'the greater order'. The older and larger of the two major orders of the Thai monastic Sangha. Luang Por Chah, (and thus Wat Pah Pong and its branches), was a member of this order.

**Mahayana** (Pali: ‘*Mahāyāna*’) Literally: ‘the great vehicle’. One of the three major schools of Buddhism (the other two being *Theravada* and *Vajrayana*). Mahayana Buddhism, which includes the traditions of Zen, Pure Land and Nichiren, emphasizes practicing the path of the *Bodhisattva* which seeks the attainment of full Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. Mahayana Buddhism is prevalent in many countries in Northern Asia, such as China, Japan and Korea.

**mai nae** (Thai) Literally: ‘Not sure’; ‘changeful’; ‘maybe, maybe not’. A short, common phrase often used by Luang Por Chah to describe the changeful, unstable, unpredictable nature of all phenomenon.

**majjhima** (Pali) Literally: ‘middle’. A ‘majjhima monk’ is one who has been ordained for more than five years but less than ten. Majjhima monks are considered to have completed their initial training and are not required by the Vinaya to live under the guidance of a teacher.

**mānatta** (Pali) A Vinaya-regulated period of penance during which a monk, having committed an offence of *Saṅghādisesa* and confessed it, is deprived of certain rights and must observe certain duties.

**Māra** (Pali) The embodiment of evil, defilement and temptation, sometimes personified as a Satan-like figure. In other contexts, the word refers to a class of malevolent deities of the sensual realm.

**Mātikā** (Pali) Pali chants performed by the Sangha at interment and cremation ceremonies.

**merit** (Pali: ‘*puñña*; Thai: ‘boon’) Merit refers to actions of body, speech and mind that have a spiritually uplifting or purifying effect. The three activities productive of merit are 1) acts of generosity, 2) keeping precepts, and 3) the inner cultivation of peace and wisdom.

**mettā** (Pali) See: loving-kindness.

**Middle Way** (Pali: *majjhimā paṭipadā*) The Buddha’s path of practice which consists of avoiding the two extremes of sensual indulgence and pointless asceticism. This term is equivalent to the *Eightfold Path*.

**Nak Tam** (Thai) Literally: ‘Expert in Dhamma’. A basic, three-levelled series of optional exams taken by new monks in Thailand just after the annual Rains Retreat. The course material covers four subjects: 1) *Dhamma*, 2) *Vinaya*, 3) biographies of the Buddha and his disciples, and 4) monastic ceremonies.

**nāmadhamma** (Pali) Mental phenomena. A collective term for feeling, perception, volition, sensory contact, and attention. Some teachers also use *nāmadhamma* to refer to the mental components of the five *khandhas*.

**navaka** (Pali) Literally: ‘new’. A term used to describe a monk during his first five years of training. A navaka monk is required by the *Vinaya* to live under the guidance of (literally: ‘in dependence upon’) his preceptor or another qualified teacher of over ten-years standing.

**nesajjik** (Thai) The Thai form of the Pali term ‘*nesajjika*’ meaning ‘sitter’s practice’. A practitioner who voluntarily takes on this practice will refrain from lying down for the duration of their vow. This is one of the thirteen *dhutanga* practices allowed by the Buddha and was mandatory every *Wan Phra* night for all members of the *Wat Pah Pong* community.

**Nibbāna** (Pali; Sanskrit: *Nirvāna*) Enlightenment – the goal of Buddhist practice. The final liberation of the mind from all suffering (*dukkha*); the elimination of all mental taints (*āsava*) and defilements (*kilesa*); escape from the round of rebirth (*samsāra*).

**nikāya** (Pali) Literally: ‘group’ or ‘order’. The term is used to refer to the two major groupings of the Thai monastic Sangha: the *Mahānikāya* and the *Dhammayut nikāya*.

**nimitta** (Pali) A mental ‘sign’, usually (but not exclusively) a visual image, that may arise as meditation deepens. If attended to skillfully and without attachment, a nimitta can enhance the movement towards deeper concentration and penetrative insight.

**Nissaggiya Pācittiya** (Pali) Literally: ‘forfeiture and confession’. The name of a class of thirty training rules (*sikkhāpada*) in the

*Pātimokkha* which entail the relinquishment of certain inappropriate items, followed by confession. Such contraband items include: gold, silver, currency, superfluous cloth requisites and a second alms-bowl.

**nissaya** (Pali) Literally: ‘dependence’. 1) The five-year commitment of a junior monk to live under the guidance of his teacher. 2) The four requisites upon which a monk’s life is sustained: alms-food, cloth, shelter and medicine.

**nīvaraṇa** (Pali) *See:* five hindrances

**non-returner** (Pali: *anagāmī*) One who has attained the third level of enlightenment through abandoning the five lower fetters (*saṃyojana*) that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth and who, after death, will never again return to this world. Most *anagāmis* complete their practice of the Eightfold Path in the realm called *Suddhāvāsa*.

**novice** (Pali: *sāmanera* – Literally: ‘a small *saṃṇāta*’) One who has formally undergone the *Going Forth* ceremony and thus avowed to live by the *Ten Precepts*. As full monks’ ordination requires the candidate to be at least twenty years old, novice Ordination has traditionally been the province of boys (at least ‘old enough to scare crows’) and teenagers. Luang Por Chah, however, used the novice Ordination as a probationary period before full Ordination, irrespective of the age of the postulant.

**Observance Day** (Thai: *Wan Phra*) The half moon, full moon and dark moon days of the lunar calendar. Since the time of the Buddha, it has been customary for lay people to gather together at the local monastery on these days to chant, observe the Eight Precepts, and listen to the Dhamma. While the Pali word ‘*Uposatha*’ indicates only the full and new moons, the Thai ‘*Wan Phra*’ and its English equivalent ‘*Observance Day*’, covers the half moons as well.

**once-returner** (Pali: *sakadāgāmi*) One who has attained the second level of enlightenment through abandoning the five lower fetters (*saṃyojana*) and who, after death, will only have to be reborn in this world once more.

**'the one who knows'** (Thai: 'poo roo') A Thai definition of the word 'Buddho'. An inner faculty of awareness. Under the influence of ignorance and defilements, it knows things wrongly. Trained through the practice of the *Eightfold Path*, it is the awakened knowing of the way things are.

**Ordination** (Pali: *Upasampadā*) The ceremony of acceptance or initiation into the Sangha.

**ottappa** (Pali) A wise and healthy fear of the consequences of evil actions. Often paired with wise shame (*hiri*).

**outer robe** (Pali/Thai: *sanghāṭi*) The double-layered outer robe of a Buddhist monk, measuring some three meters by two, usually worn folded over the left shoulder during ceremonies and formal meetings of the Sangha. It is one of a monk's three main robes.  
*See:* Appendix I

**pabbajjā** (Pali) *See:* Going Forth

**paccattam** (Pali) To be individually experienced. Teachers in the *Thai Forest Tradition* use this term as shorthand for the quality of the Dhamma known as '*paccattam veditabbo vinñññūhi*' – a phenomena which can only be experienced individually by the wise.

**Paccekabuddha** (Pali) Literally: 'Solitary Buddha'. A Buddha who lacks the requisite store of *pāramī* to teach others the practice that leads to Awakening, and who leads a solitary life.

**pācittiya** (Pali) Literally: 'confession'. The name of a class of ninety-two training rules (*sikkhāpada*) in the *Pātimokkha* which entail confession to another monk for inappropriate behavior.

**Pali** (Pali: 'Pāli') The Prakrit language in which the Theravada Buddhist canon (*Tipiṭaka*) is preserved. As Pali had no written script, 'Pali' texts preserved throughout the Theravada world are generally written in the native script of each country (e.g., in Sri Lanka, 'Pali' texts are preserved in Sinhala script; in Thailand, they are in Thai script; in European countries, they are in Roman script; etc.).

**Pali Canon** (Pali: ‘*Tipiṭaka*’; Sanskrit: ‘*Tripiṭaka*’ – Literally: ‘three baskets’) The threefold corpus upon which Theravada Buddhism is based: 1) the *Vinaya Piṭaka* – dealing with the monastic Discipline; 2) the *Sutta Piṭaka* – containing the teachings in narrative and verse; and 3) the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* – a systematization of the teachings.

**pāmsukūla cloth** (Pali) Literally: ‘dust heap’ cloth. Discarded or abandoned cloth used by monks for making new robes or repairing old ones. Since the time of the Buddha, cremation forests have been a popular source for such cloth.

**paññā** (Pali) Wisdom; discernment; insight. The third aspect of the *threefold training*, *paññā* consists in ‘seeing things as they are’, that is, observing the impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anattā*) nature of all conditioned phenomena. *Paññā* can also be described as insight into the *Four Noble Truths* or into *Dependent Origination*.

**pārājika** (Pali) Literally: ‘defeat’. The offences earning immediate expulsion from the Sangha, namely: 1) sexual intercourse, 2) theft, 3) intentionally taking human life, and 4) lying about a spiritual attainment. A monk who commits one of these offences is forbidden from re-ordinating in this lifetime.

**pāramī** (Pali) Perfections of character. A list of ten qualities believed to have been developed over many lifetimes by the *bodhisattva*. More broadly speaking, these are essential virtues for all spiritual practitioners to develop. They are listed in the commentarial texts as: 1) generosity (*dāna*), 2) virtue (*sīla*), 3) renunciation (*nekkhamma*), 4) wisdom (*paññā*), 5) effort (*viriya*), 6) patience (*khanti*), 7) truthfulness (*sacca*), 8) determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), 9) loving-kindness (*mettā*), and 10) equanimity (*upekkhā*).

**Paritta** (Pali) Protective verses chanted in order to ward off ill and create blessings. Such protective chants, comprising passages from the *Pali Canon* and traditional verses in praise of the *Triple Gem*, are frequently chanted by monastics and lay Buddhists in *Theravada* Buddhist countries on auspicious occasions.

**pariyatti** (Pali) The theoretical understanding of Dhamma obtained through listening, reading and study. Ideally, it provides the foundation for putting the teachings into practice (*patipatti*), and penetrating their profound truth (*pativedha*).

**The Path of Purification** (Pali: *Visuddhimagga*) The chief Theravada commentarial text. This text was composed in Pali and compiled from exegeses dating from the time of the Buddha by Ven. Buddhaghosa in Sri Lanka during the fifth-century.

**paṭiccasamuppāda** (Pali) *See:* Dependent Origination

**Pātimokkha** (Pali) The basic code of monastic discipline recited fortnightly in the Pali original in monasteries with a quorum of four monks. The Patimokkha consists of 227 training rules, classed according to the nature of the offense committed, i.e. entailing disrobing (*pārājika*), formal Sangha meeting (*saṅghādisesa*), forfeiture (*nissaggiya*), confession (*pācittiya*), acknowledgement (*pātidesanīya*), or training (*sekhiya*).

**paṭipadā** (Pali) Literally: ‘path of practice’. Though originally having the neutral meaning of any path of practice, wholesome or unwholesome, this term is used by teachers in the *Thai Forest Tradition* to refer to the *Middle Way*, or in other words, the Eightfold Path.

**pavāraṇā** (Pali) Literally: ‘invitation’. 1) A formal invitation to a monk by a lay Buddhist to inform him or her when the monk is in need of requisites. 2) A request or invitation for feedback or advice. This request is formalised in the annual ceremony marking the end of the three-month Rains Retreat, when every monastic invites their companions to comment on anything ‘seen, heard or suspected’ to be remiss in one’s conduct.

**peta** (Pali; Sanskrit: *preta*) A ‘hungry ghost’ – one of a class of beings in the lower realms, sometimes capable of appearing to human beings.

**phra** (Thai) Venerable. 1) The Thai word for ‘monk’ (*bhikkhu*). 2) A term used as a formal title – either by itself or as a prefix to a longer title – for a monk (e.g. *Phra Ajahn Chah*). 3) A term used to modify a noun to express a sense of sanctity (e.g. *Wan Phra* – Literally: ‘holy day’).

**pijarana** (Thai) To reflect, examine or investigate. A term used by teachers in the *Thai Forest Tradition* to describe a wide range of introspective practices.

**pīti** (Pali) Rapture; bliss; delight. The third factor of meditative absorption (*jhāna*).

**por dee** (Thai) Literally: ‘just right’, or ‘just the right amount’. This common Thai phrase refers to the optimum amount, neither too much nor too little. Luang Por Chah used this word as a synonym for the *Middle Way*.

**postulant** (Pali: *anagārika*; Thai: *pakhao*) A monastic aspirant who keeps the *Eight Precepts* and wears white for a period ranging from a few hours to a year or more depending on the monastery and circumstance, before being allowed to ordain as a *novice* and then as a monk.

**Pubbasikkhāvāṇṇanā** (Pali) Literally: ‘The Exposition of the Preliminary Training’. A Thai Vinaya commentary (known as the ‘*Pubbasikkhā*’ for short) composed in the nineteenth century based on Pali Commentaries brought to Thailand from Sri Lanka, and taken by the forest monks of Luang Por Chah’s generation as the gold standard for Vinaya practice.

**puñña** (Pali) See: merit

**Rains Retreat** (Pali: *vassa*) A period of monastic retreat instituted by the Buddha, in which monks must refrain from all but the most necessary journeys for the whole of the Indian monsoon season (from the full moon of July through to the full moon of October).

**requisite** (Pali: *parikkhāra*) An item used by a monk. This term is used to describe both the essentials of a monk’s survival – i.e. their robes, alms-food, lodging and medicines – as well as any accessory items they might possess.

**Right View** (Pali: *sammāditthi*) The first of the eight factors of the *Eight-fold Path*. Right View on the preliminary (*lokiya*) level consists of an acceptance of the enlightenment of the Buddha and the law

of *kamma*. At its most profound level, Right View means seeing things in accordance with reality: observing the impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anattā*) nature of all conditioned phenomena; and, insight into the *Four Noble Truths* and *Dependent Origination*.

**rūpadhamma** (Pali) Literally: ‘material phenomena’. Material form – usually with connotations indicating the physical body – as juxtaposed to mental phenomena (*nāmadhamma*).

**sādhu** (Pali) Literally: ‘It is well’. A common Pali and Thai exclamation expressive of appreciation or agreement.

**samādhi** (Pali) As *sammāsamādhi*, this term refers to concentration, unification of mind, mental stability. As the title of the second of the three trainings, *samādhi* is an umbrella term covering the whole realm of effort for the purpose of abandoning the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome.

**samana** (Pali) A recluse or contemplative. One who abandons the conventional obligations of social life in order to find a way of life more ‘in tune’ (*sama*) with the true nature of things. A term which, although predating the Buddha, was adopted by him and given the more exalted meaning of ‘one who pacifies unwholesomeness’.

**sāmanera** (Pali) *See:* novice

**samatha** (Pali) Tranquillity, the state of lucid calm. ‘Samatha meditation’ refers to those meditation techniques which focus on stilling and pacifying the mind rather than on reflecting and investigating phenomena (i.e. insight meditation – *vipassanā*). Luang Por Chah was not in favour of a hard and fast division of meditation practices into these two categories.

**sammāditṭhi** (Pali) *See:* Right View

**samor** (Thai) Chelubic myrobalan. A laxative member of the myrobalan family allowed by the Vinaya to be eaten at any time of the day.

**sampajañña** (Pali) Alertness, clear comprehension, self-awareness. Four kinds of sampajañña are mentioned in the text: 1) clear comprehension of purpose, 2) of suitability, 3) of resort, and 4) of non-delusion.

**samsāra** (Pali) Literally: ‘perpetual wandering’. 1) The cycle of birth, aging, sickness, death and rebirth, which is without a knowable beginning and will not come to an end until, through practice of the *Eightfold Path*, one attains *Nibbāna*. 2) The world of all conditioned phenomena – mental and material.

**Sangha** (Pali: ‘Saṅgha’) The community of Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*) and nuns (*bhikkhunīs*). Sangha can refer either to the global institution of Buddhist monasticism or to individual monastic communities. In a higher sense, Sangha refers to the ‘community’ of enlightened disciples of the Buddha – lay and ordained – who have attained at least stream-entry (*sotāpaññā*), the first of the transcendent paths culminating in *Nibbāna*.

**saṅghādisesa** (Pali) The second-most serious class of Vinaya rules (after *pārājika* defeat). A monk who transgresses any of the thirteen rules in this class of offense must undergo a period of penance (*mānatta*) and probation (*parivasa*) entailing formal meetings of the Sangha.

**Sāsana** (Pali) Literally: ‘message’. The dispensation, doctrine and legacy of the Buddha; the Buddhist religion.

**sati** (Pali) Mindfulness, recollection, bearing in mind. A mental factor inseparably associated with all karmically wholesome (*kusala*) states of consciousness. In its most developed form, *Right Mindfulness* is the seventh factor of the *Eightfold Path* and thus a requisite for the attainment of enlightenment.

**sense-restraint** (Pali: *indriyasamvara*): ‘Seeing a form with the eye (or perceiving an object through any of the other sense doors), [one] is not obsessed with that which is pleasing, is not repelled by that which is unpleasing, and remains with body-mindfulness established, with immeasurable awareness.’ One of the three ‘always relevant’ (*apaññaka*) Dhammas praised by the Buddha and frequently expounded upon by teachers of the *Thai Forest Tradition*.

**seven enlightenment factors** (Pali: *bojjhaṅga*) Seven wholesome mental states listed as antidotes to the five hindrances and qualities to be developed in order to give rise to knowledge and liberation (*vimutti*): 1) mindfulness (*sati*), 2) investigation of Dhamma (*dhamma-vicaya*), 3) energy (*viriya*), 4) rapture (*pīti*), 5) tranquillity (*passadhi*), 6) concentration or collectedness (*saṃādhi*), and 7) equanimity (*upekkhā*).

**sīla** (Pali) Virtue, morality. The first aspect of the *threefold training*, *sīla* is the quality of ethical and moral purity that prevents unskillful actions. The term also includes the training precepts, recollection of which restrains the performance of such unskillful actions. Of the *Eightfold Path*, *Right Speech*, *Right Action* and *Right Livelihood* are aspects of *sīla*.

**sikkhāpada** (Pali) Points of training. The Pāṭimokkha training rules formulated by the Buddha for his monastic disciples.

**sotāpanna** (Pali) *See:* stream-enterer

**stream-enterer** (Pali: *sotāpanna*) One who has attained the first level of enlightenment through abandoning the first three fetters (*saṃyojana*) and has thus entered the ‘stream’ flowing inexorably to *Nibbāna*.

**stream-entry** (Pali) The first stage of enlightenment after which one is no longer subject to the possibility of birth in a lower realm and will realise the fourth and final stage of arahantship within seven lifetimes at most.

**stupa** (Pali: *thūpa*) A mound-like or hemispherical structure enshrining relics of the Buddha or those of Noble Disciples.

**sukha** (Pali) Pleasure, ease, satisfaction. In meditation, a mental quality that reaches full maturity in the third *jhāna*, where it is usually rendered as ‘bliss’. The ultimate sukha is *Nibbāna*.

**sutta** (Pali; Sanskrit: *sūtra*) Literally: ‘a thread’. A discourse or sermon attributed to the Buddha or one of his contemporary disciples. After the Buddha’s death, the Suttas were passed down in the *Pali*

language by means oral tradition, and were eventually committed to the written form in Sri Lanka sometime before the Common Era after. More than 10,000 suttas are collected in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, the main repository for such texts in the *Pali Canon*. These discourses are widely regarded as the earliest record of the Buddha's teachings.

**Sutta Piṭaka** (Pali) Literally: ‘The basket of Suttas’. The second of the three sections of the *Pali Canon*, containing the majority of the Buddha’s discourses to his disciples; also known as ‘the Suttas’ or ‘the Discourses’. The *Sutta Piṭaka* is composed of five nikāyas (collections): the *Dīgha Nikāya* (containing long discourses); the *Majjhima Nikāya* (containing discourse of mid-range length); the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (containing discourses organized by subject); the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (containing discourses organized by ascending numerical list); and the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (subsuming various other shorter collections of teachings).

**Tan** (Thai) An honorific roughly equivalent to the Pali, ‘*bhante*’ or English ‘Venerable’. A common way of addressing monks.

**Tathāgatha** (Pali) Literally: ‘thus gone’ or ‘thus come’. An epithet used by Buddha to refer to himself.

**Ten Precepts** The ten novice (*sāmanera*) training precepts, i.e. refraining from: 1) killing other beings, 2) stealing, 3) any sexual activity, 4) lying, 5) the use of intoxicants, 6) eating after midday, 7) entertainment, 8) bodily beautification and adornment, 9) using a high or luxurious bed, and 10) the use of money.

**ten wholesome paths** (Pali: *kusala-kamma-paṭhā*) A list of ten virtues of body, speech and mind (elsewhere referred to as ‘*agārika-vinaya*’). Namely, refraining from: 1) taking life, 2) stealing, 3) sexual misconduct, 4) lying, 5) coarse speech, 6) divisive speech, 7) gossip, 8) avarice, 9) thoughts of aggression, and 10) wrong view.

**Thai Forest Tradition** The teachers and forest monasteries, primarily situated in Northeast Thailand (*Isan*), that trace their lineage to Luang Pu Mun and Luang Pu Sao. The tradition is characterized

by a devotion to traditional meditation practices accompanied by a strict adherence to the *Vinaya* and the adoption of various *dhutaṅga* practices. *Luang Por Chah* considered himself part of this tradition. Also referred to as the *Isan Forest Tradition*.

**thera** (Pali) Literally: ‘elder’. An honorific title automatically conferred upon a monk of at least ten years’ standing.

**Theravada** (Pali: *Theravāda*) Literally: ‘doctrine of the elders’. The dominant form of Buddhism in South-East Asia (Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos), Theravada takes the *Pali Canon* (*tipiṭaka*) as its primary text and the *arahant* as its ideal and working goal of practice.

**thirty-two parts of the body** A meditation theme recommended by the Buddha for countering lust in which thirty-two parts of the body are investigated in terms of the *three characteristics* and their unattractive (*asubha*) nature. These parts are as follows: 1) hair of the head, 2) hair of the body, 3) nails, 4) teeth, 5) skin, 6) flesh, 7) sinews, 8) bones, 9) bone marrow, 10) spleen, 11) heart, 12) liver, 13) membranes, 14) kidneys, 15) lungs, 16) bowels, 17) entrails, 18) undigested food, 19) excrement, 20) bile, 21) phlegm, 22) pus, 23) blood, 24) sweat, 25) fat 26) tears, 27) grease, 28) spittle, 29) mucus, 30) oil of the joints, 31) urine, and 32) brain.

**three characteristics (of existence)** (Pali: *tilakkhaṇa*) A foundational teaching of the Buddha; the insight that all conditioned phenomena are: 1) impermanent (*anicca*), 2) unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and 3) empty of self (*anattā*). Deep meditative contemplation of these characteristics can lead to *Nibbāna*.

**threefold training** (Pali: *tisikkhā*) The cultivation of 1) morality (*sīla*), 2) concentration (*saṃādhi*), and 3) wisdom (*paññā*). An abbreviated form of the *Eightfold Path*.

**three refuges** (Pali: *tisaraṇa*): 1) the *Buddha*, 2) the *Dhamma*, and 3) the *Sangha*. Formal commitment to these refuges, or places of safety, is commonly expressed outwardly in the formula, ‘I go for refuge to the Buddha ... the Dhamma ... the Sangha’. On an inner level, these

refuges can be understood as follows: the Buddha refers to inner awakening, the Dhamma to the ‘way things are’, and the Sangha to the right practice leading to awakening.

**Tipiṭaka** (Pali) *See:* Pali Canon

**toothwood** A single-use, handmade toothbrush carved out of astringent wood with frayed bristles on one end tapering to a pointed pick on the other. Monks in the *Thai Forest Tradition* still make such toothwood and, on occasion of first arriving at a monastery, taking leave, or asking for forgiveness, will often offer a gift of a dozen or so to their teacher.

**toraman** (Thai) In modern Thai, this word means ‘torture’, but it is used by Thai forest monks with its older meaning of training the mind by opposing its desires.

**Triple Gem** (Pali: *tiratana*) An abbreviated, poetic designation for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha in their aspect of being jewel-like in extreme preciousness, value and beauty.

**tudong** (Thai) A Thai word derived from the Pali ‘*dhutāṅga*’, ‘tudong’ refers to the common monastic practice (especially amongst monks of the *Thai Forest Tradition*) of wandering through the countryside sleeping rough - while practising a number of the *dhutāṅga* observances. Those monastics living their life in this way are called ‘tudong monks’ and are said to be ‘on tudong’.

**Ubon** Ubon Ratchathani Province; a province in Northeast (*Isan*) Thailand. The birthplace of Luang Por Chah and many of his contemporaries in the *Thai Forest Tradition*.

**upacārasamādhi** (Pali) Literally: ‘neighbourhood concentration’. Access concentration; the state of lucid calm in which the mind has abandoned the five hindrances but has not yet reached absorption (*appanāsamādhi* or *jhāna*).

**upasampadā** (Pali) *See:* Ordination

**Uposatha (Day)** (Pali) The full moon and dark moon days during which Buddhist monastics gather to recite the *Pātimokkha* rules.

**Uposatha Hall** (Pali) The specially designated building in a monastery in which formal meetings of the Sangha and ceremonies such as Ordinations (*upasampadā*) and the *Pātimokkha* recitation take place.

**upper robe** (Pali: *uttarāsaṅga*; Thai: *jiwon*) One of the three main robes of a Buddhist monk. The large rectangular robe – in Thailand, commonly measuring three metres by two – that covers a monk’s torso and legs. This robe is worn on all formal occasions and whenever the monk leaves the monastery. *See: Appendix I*

**Vajrayana** (Sanskrit) Literally: ‘the diamond vehicle’. One of the three major schools of Buddhism (the other two being *Theravada* and *Mahayana*). The form of Buddhism primarily found in Bhutan, Tibet, and Mongolia.

**Vesakha Puja** (Pali: *Vesākha Pūja*) The memorial of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and passing away, celebrated on the full moon day of the fifth lunar month, Vesakha.

**vibhavatañhā** (Pali) Literally: ‘thirst for non-becoming’: the craving to not exist, or the desire for self-annihilation. One of the three types of craving – along with craving for sensuality (*kāmatañhā*) and craving for becoming (*bhavatañhā*) – that the Buddha listed in the *Second Noble Truth* as being the cause of suffering.

**vicāra** (Pali) Sustained evaluation or appreciation. In meditation, *vicāra* is the mental factor that dwells upon the chosen meditation object. It is a factor of the first *jhāna* and is closely associated with *vitakka*, the mental factor by which the mind takes up the object. *Vicara* is commonly translated as ‘sustained thought’.

**vihāra** (Pali) Literally: ‘abode’. A dwelling place, particularly a monastic residence, i.e. a monastery.

**Vinaya** (Pali) Literally: that which ‘leads out’ of suffering. Broadly, Vinaya refers to all the rules, regulations, observances and traditions designed to facilitate the practice of Dhamma. Vinaya finds its apotheosis in the Monastic Discipline and is most commonly used as a synonym for it.

**Vinaya Piṭaka** (Pali) Literally: ‘The basket of the Discipline’. The first of the three sections of the *Pali Canon*, containing the Buddha’s allowances, prohibitions, rules and regulations for his *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* disciples. The *Vinaya Piṭaka* is, in turn, composed of three parts (usually presented in six volumes): the *Suttavibhaṅga* (containing the explanations for every *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha* rule); the *Khandakhas* (containing additional regulations, protocols, origin stories and allowances); and the *Parivāra* (a summary and analysis of the first two parts for teaching purposes).

**vipassanā** (Pali) Literally: ‘clear seeing’. Insight into physical and mental phenomena as they arise and disappear, seeing them for what they actually are – in and of themselves – in terms of the *three characteristics* (*tilakkhaṇa*) and in terms of suffering (*dukkha*), its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation.

**vipassanupakkilesa** (Pali) Literally: ‘corruptions of clear seeing’. Attachment to intense meditation experiences leading to an overestimation of progress on the path. The standard list (appearing in the *Visuddhimagga*) of the bases for the defilement are ten in number: 1) light, 2) psychic knowledge, 3) rapture, 4) serenity, 5) pleasure, 6) extreme conviction, 7) exertion, 8) obsession, 9) equanimity, and 10) longing.

**Visuddhimagga** (Pali) *See:* The Path of Purification

**vitakka** (Pali) Directed thought. In meditation, *vitakka* is the mental factor by which attention is applied to the chosen meditation object.

**walking meditation** (Pali: ‘*caṇikama*’; Thai: ‘*jonkrom*’) In the Thai Forest Tradition, walking meditation usually takes the form of walking back and forth along a prescribed path, from twenty to thirty paces long, while focusing attention on one’s meditation object.

**Wan Phra** (Thai) *See:* Observance Day

**wat** (Thai) A Buddhist monastery or temple.

**Wat Nong Pah Pong** (Thai) The monastery which *Luang Por Chah* established in 1954 in *Ubon* Province, Thailand. On all but the most formal occasions, it is referred to simply as ‘*Wat Pah Pong*’.

**Wat Pah Nanachat** (Thai) Literally: ‘International Forest Monastery’. The monastery founded by *Ajahn Sumedho* in 1975 in *Ubon*, Thailand, at the behest of *Luang Por Chah*, as a centre for training monks from abroad.

**worldly dhammas** (Pali: *lokadhamma*) Four pairs of opposing conditions inextricably bound up with human life. These fleeting and ultimately unsatisfactory conditions are given in the Suttas as: praise and blame; gain and loss; fame and disrepute; pleasure and pain.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.\*

You are free to:

- Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

- Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.
- NoDerivatives — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.

No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

Notices:

You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation.

No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material.

Panyaprateep Foundation asserts its moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

Panyaprateep Foundation requests that you attribute ownership of the work to Panyaprateep Foundation on copying, distribution, display or performance of the work.

\*<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>